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Fiascos in Public Policy and Foreign Policy

Edited by
Kai Oppermann and Alexander Spencer

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Fiascos in Public Policy and Foreign Policy

The collection brings together scholars from Public Policy and Foreign Policy to address the theme of policy fiascos. So far research on failure and fiascos in both Public Policy and Foreign Policy has existed independent of each other with very little communication between the two sub-disciplines. The contributions aim to bridge this divide and bring the two sides into a dialogue on some of the central issues in the study of fiascos, including how to define, identify and measure policy failure (and success); the social and political contestation about what counts as policy fiascos; the causes of policy fiascos and their consequences; the attribution of blame; as well as processes of learning from fiascos. A common theme of the collection is to explore different epistemological and methodological approaches to studying policy fiascos.

This book will appeal to scholars and practitioners interested in policy failures and fiascos both within and among states and other international actors.

This book was previously published as a special issue of the *Journal of European Public Policy*.

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Contents

Studying fiascos: bringing public and foreign policy together

Kai Oppermann and Alexander Spencer

Mistakes happen. In politics no less than everywhere else. Their causes and consequences are at the heart of what scholars in public policy and foreign policy have always been interested in. Policy decisions in either field tend to attract much greater scholarly attention if they are seen to have gone wrong than if they are considered a success. It is small wonder, then, that many of the best-studied public and foreign policy episodes are precisely those which have been linked to 'disastrous' failures or consequences. Prominent examples in public policy include 'planning disasters' such as Sydney's Opera House, San Francisco's rapid transit system or the Concorde supersonic passenger jet (Hall 1980); large-scale policy 'blunders' such as the Thatcher government's poll tax initiative and the attempt to introduce identity cards in Britain (Butler *et al.* 1994; King and Crewe 2013) or the European Union's (EU's) Common Fisheries Policy (Ritchie and Zito 1998); as well as various 'crises' such as the Swedish monetary crisis of 1992 (Baggott 1998) or the British bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) crisis in the 1990s (Stern and Sundelius 1998). Well-researched cases in foreign policy, in turn, include the British policy of appeasement towards Nazi Germany in 1938 (Stedman 2011), the attempted occupation of the Suez Canal zone by Britain, France and Israel in 1956 (Gorst and Johnman 1997), the inability of the United Nations (UN) peacekeeping mission to stop the Srebrenica massacre in 1995 (Brändström and Kuipers 2003); as well as a number of cases in United States (US) foreign policy, like the failure to prevent the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 (Wohlstetter 1962), the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba in 1961 (Blight and Kornbluh 1998), the Vietnam War (Kaiser 2002; Tuchman 1984), the 1980 Iran hostage rescue mission (Smith 1985) or the 2003 Iraq War (Yetiv 2011).

In both fields, the predominant concern of research has been with understanding and explaining why policy fiascos have occurred. In public policy, scholars have, for example, focused on competing values and motives of decision-makers, unrealistic policy objectives and expectations, increasing social and technological complexity, uncertainty, implementation failures or

various deficiencies in decision-making, such as undue haste, incrementalism, competing bureaucratic interests and inadequate checks and balances (Bovens *et al.* 1998; Dunleavy 1995). In foreign policy, different theories have similarly identified numerous sources of fiascos, most notably cognitive biases and misperceptions (Janis 1989; Jervis 1976) or the emotions of individual decision-makers (McDermott 2004); socio-psychological dynamics in small decision-making groups (Janis 1982; 't Hart *et al.* 1997); or bureaucratic politics and an overreliance on organizational routines (Allison and Zelikow 1999). Since decision-makers are expected to learn primarily from their own or others' past mistakes (Howlett 2012), many accounts of public and foreign policy fiascos also seek lessons to avoid such mistakes in the future.

As the reader will notice, there is, however, very little agreement in the literature on the precise conceptualization of a 'fiasco', with many authors referring to alternative concepts such as 'failure', 'mistake', 'crisis', 'disaster' or 'blunder' as synonyms. Others, in contrast, differentiate these concepts – for example, by pointing to differences in the role of agency or in the levels of severity and politicization. As there is also no agreement in this regard among the contributors to this collection, we have purposely avoided asking our authors to start out from a single definition of the constitutive elements of 'fiascos' or to use a common terminology. What unites the authors in this collection, however, is their interest in situations in which things have gone wrong, where policy has fallen short of some objective or subjective benchmark of success.

Against the background of the long research traditions in public policy and foreign policy, the aim of this collection is twofold. First, it serves to reflect on and further develop the state of the art in studying policy fiascos at a time when research in this field is at a critical juncture. Twenty years after the publication of the seminal study on 'Understanding Policy Fiascos' by Mark Bovens and Paul 't Hart (1996) the collection takes stock of the progress that has been made since and identifies the boundaries of our current knowledge about policy fiascos. It offers the first review of original research on policy failures since the volumes edited by Pat Gray and Paul 't Hart (1998) and Mark Bovens, Paul 't Hart and B. Guy Peters (2001), and comes at a time when the field experiences a noticeable and very welcome increase in research activities. The renewed interest in understanding policy fiascos is evidenced both by an increasing number of panels, workshops and major research conferences on the topic, as well as by some recent publications (e.g., Howlett 2012; Howlett *et al.* 2015; King and Crewe 2013; McConnell 2015; Walker and Malici 2011). In our view, this 'rediscovery' of policy fiascos as an object of study after years of relative neglect marks a watershed moment at which it is crucial to ensure that future research productively builds on and adds to existing knowledge in order to maximize its potential. The contributions to this collection will serve as an important milestone in the development of such a cumulative research agenda in that they bring together the most recent findings of leading experts in the field, identify the most significant gaps in the current state of the art and point to fruitful avenues for further research. Specifically, this includes

questions of how to define, identify and measure policy failure (and success); the social and political contestation about what counts as policy fiascos; the causes of policy fiascos and their consequences; the attribution of blame; as well as processes of learning from fiascos. In terms of epistemology and methodology, the collection espouses a pluralist perspective and includes contributions both from positivist and post-positivist research traditions.

Second, the collection explores the potential of bridging the divide between research on public policy and foreign policy fiascos by bringing two literatures together which have so far talked very little to each other. Existing research on fiascos in the public policy field has mostly been ignored in foreign policy analysis and vice versa. This holds true no less for two of the most recent book-length studies on foreign policy mistakes in the US (Walker and Malici 2011) and on public policy blunders in Britain (King and Crewe 2013). Given the largely similar questions and research objectives of the two literatures – understanding policy fiascos and their causes and consequences – the lack of exchange between them is indeed surprising. In our view, the disciplinary divisions in analysing policy fiascos between the fields of public policy and foreign policy are unfortunate and hinder efforts at a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon and dynamics of policy failure.

With these two purposes in mind, the collection employs a broad understanding of foreign policy that goes beyond traditional notions of diplomacy and security to include issues of international public policy. Understood in this way, we hold that the study of foreign policy fiascos has a lot to gain from recent conceptual and methodological advances in research on public policy fiascos. Similarly, the literature on public policy fiascos stands to benefit from opening up its research agenda to foreign policy fiascos which would broaden the scope of its empirical arguments and provide new opportunities for further developing and refining its conceptual frameworks. Furthermore, public policy will benefit from insights gained in foreign policy on the rising interconnectedness of national and international causes and consequences of (foreign) policy failure. Along these lines, the collection will encourage a genuine dialogue between the public policy and foreign policy literatures in two complementary ways. On the one hand, the editors have challenged contributors from the public policy field to reflect on how their research relates to foreign policy fiascos. On the other hand, foreign policy scholars were asked in their case studies on foreign policy fiascos to critically engage with the public policy literature.

OVERVIEW

The collection starts with a framing piece by Mark Bovens and Paul 't Hart, who review the study of policy failure 20 years after their seminal contributions to the field. The authors start out from a social constructivist view on policy fiascos and make the case that 'failure' is not an inherent attribute of policy but rather a judgment about policy which is debated controversially in political discourse.

Fiascos do not just 'happen', but are constructed in labelling processes that are not necessarily 'evidence-based'. Specifically, the contribution distinguishes two logics of evaluation which do not always go hand-in-hand: a political logic which focusses on the reputation conferred on policies in public discourse; and a programmatic logic which assesses observable costs and benefits. Policies which are evaluated positively on the programmatic dimension may still damage the reputation of political actors ('tragedy'), just as policies which fail to deliver beneficial outcomes can bring dividends on the political dimension ('farce'). Policy 'fiascos', in turn, are policies which are judged to have failed in terms of both the political and the programmatic logic. Moving forward, Bovens and 't Hart argue for developing mid-range theories to explain policy fiascos.

Allan McConnell offers a second conceptual contribution to this collection which considers two fundamental questions in studying 'failures' in public policy: what constitutes a failure and what causes such failures? What is more, the contribution reflects on how the insights on these two questions in public policy can be made fruitful for the analysis of fiascos in foreign policy. First, McConnell outlines a number of challenges in defining policy failures, including divergent assessment criteria ranging from the failure to achieve declared goals to the failure to garner sufficient support for a policy. In order to bring greater clarity to what constitutes policy failures, the contribution suggests to distinguish between process failures, programme/decision failures and political failures. On the second question, McConnell points to a number of methodological difficulties in pinpointing the causes of policy failures and argues for re-focusing our analytical perspective on how political actors frame the causes of such failures. Specifically, the contribution outlines three key elements which many such 'failure' narratives highlight: individual decision-makers; institutions and the policy process; as well as deeper societal values.

The next contribution by Kai Oppermann and Alexander Spencer picks up the concept of 'failure narratives' introduced in the previous contribution and reemphasizes that fiascos are not factual occurrences, but that they are constructed in political discourse. Employing the method of narrative analysis adopted from literary studies, the authors show how fiascos are told in a narrative form that is structured around three elements: the setting of a story which delimits appropriate behaviour in a given situation; the negative characterization of individual or collective actors involved in the story; and the emplotment of an event as a 'fiasco' through the attribution of cause and responsibility. In order to illustrate such a post-positivist approach to studying policy fiascos, the authors apply the suggested method in a case study on German media reporting about Germany's abstention in the UN Security Council on Resolution 1973 authorizing the military intervention in Libya in March 2011. The analysis highlights the discursive struggle of interpretation between dominant 'fiasco' narratives and marginalized counter-narratives which try to refute such claims.

The following piece by Klaus Brummer subscribes to a more objectivist understanding of foreign policy fiascos. It makes the case that explanations of policy failure should move beyond the structural perspectives commonly found in public policy and place more emphasis on the role of individual decision-makers. Specifically, Brummer argues that the personalities of individual decision-makers are an important but often neglected source of foreign policy fiascos. He substantiates his argument by employing two cognitive approaches in foreign policy analysis, leadership traits analysis and operational codes, to identify the personality traits and political beliefs of British prime ministers. Having analysed more than 900 political statements of different prime ministers, Brummer shows that individual office-holders who were responsible for major foreign policy fiascos displayed extreme scores on certain traits and beliefs. In particular, he suggests that 'fiasco prime ministers' appear to possess higher levels of self-confidence (personality trait) and an inclination for pursuing conflictual strategies (political belief).

The contribution by Jamie Gaskarth discusses the 'fiasco' of the failure of the British government in August 2013 to secure approval of the House of Commons for military action in Syria. Going back to McConnell's categorization of different types of failures, the discursive construction of this case into a fiasco mainly pointed to process failures related to how the government managed the issue in parliament. What is paradoxical, Gaskarth argues, is that the government defeat in the House of Commons was widely seen as an 'instant fiasco' despite the positive, if unintended, diplomatic consequences on the ground in Syria. This appears to confirm the usefulness of Bovens and 't Hart's distinction between a political and a programmatic dimension of policy evaluation which may lead to incongruent results. Moreover, Gaskarth argues that the vote against military action in Syria reflects longer-term trends in British foreign policy which have made it harder for British governments to mobilize domestic support for the use of military force more generally. The framing of the Syria vote as a fiasco and the highly personalized attribution of blame, however, have deflected the attention of policy-makers and commentators away from this broader context.

Christoph Meyer's contribution then moves on to consider the over- and under-reaction to transboundary threats as two inter-related types of foreign policy fiascos. Going beyond traditional issues of national security, the contribution aims at improving cross-fertilization between the foreign policy and international public policy literatures on threat response and risk management. While existing scholarship has mainly been concerned with cases of under-reaction to threats, Meyer argues that policy over-reactions can be just as costly and harmful. In fact, the pre-occupation with avoiding failures of under-reaction might lead to policy prescriptions which precisely result in failures of over-reaction. Against this background, the contribution suggests a typology of failures that can lead to either under- or over-reaction, focusing on threat diagnosis and the proportionality and timeliness of the response. Drawing on pilot case studies on a diverse set of transboundary threats, Meyer identifies three

common causal factors that can contribute to fiascos of both under- and over-reaction: learning the wrong lessons from previous incidents; decision-making in institutional silos; and pre-existing preferences of decision-makers to act or not to act.

The following contribution by Andreas Kruck, like the previous one, goes beyond the traditional scope of foreign policy and extends the study of policy fiascos to transnational non-state actors. It focuses on credit rating agencies (CRAs), and asks why these agencies have not faced more negative consequences to their status as private authorities despite their widely recognized rating failures in previous financial and economic crises. Employing a historical institutionalist approach, the author argues that the surprising resilience of CRAs and the difficulties in effectively responding to their failures are owing to flawed public policy decisions in the past which have generated unintended institutional dynamics. Paradoxically, therefore, Kruck suggests that recent failures of CRAs have not weakened their status and influence, but rather contributed to their further entrenchment and institutionalization as transnational private authorities.

In the last contribution to this collection, Ryan Beasley explores how features of Ulrich Beck's world risk society increase the likelihood of public and foreign policy fiascos. Building on previous scholarship according to which policy fiascos can often be traced back to deficient policy-making processes, he argues that the macro-level conditions of globalization affect micro-level decision-making in a way that makes such processes more failure-prone. In particular, the contribution suggests that political decision-making in the risk era is marked by significant uncertainty and an awareness of the self-generated, unpredictable and uncontrollable dynamics of modern industrial society which can potentially have catastrophic consequences. Such decision contexts, in turn, heighten cognitive dissonance in policy-makers and activate psychological dynamics of dissonance avoidance and reduction which are often the source of decision-making mistakes. The contribution illustrates these arguments by discussing the 'war on terror' as a policy response to the 9/11 attacks and the 2003 Iraq war.

LESSONS LEARNED AND FURTHER RESEARCH

The main lesson that comes out of this collection is that public policy and foreign policy fiascos should not be studied as distinct categories. Rather, future research should bring to bear insights from both fields on the joint enterprise of developing middle-range theories (Bovens and 't Hart 2016) to understand and explain the causes and consequences of different types of policy fiascos. This would acknowledge the many similarities between fiascos in public and foreign policy; for example, with regard to the political contestation of policy fiascos or the role of deficiencies in decision-making processes. Understanding public and foreign policy fiascos as examples of the same category of events would also facilitate the broader application of important concepts in