



Whose Success Counts? How Policy Roles Rewrite the Rules of “Success”

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Abstract

Policy success is widely recognized as multidimensional, yet relatively little attention has been paid to a fundamental question: whose definition of success matters? This paper argues that different policy actors prioritize different dimensions of success because they occupy different positions in the policy process. Drawing on applied literature, the paper identifies four generic actor groups—political authorizers, designers, implementers, and civic advocates—and develops expectations about the success criteria each is likely to prioritize. These expectations are explored through a survey of 121 experienced practitioners, each drawn from one of the four actor groups and asked how frequently they consider thirty policy success criteria spanning six dimensions of success. The results show clear and consistent differences. Designers concentrate primarily on program design and goal achievement. Political authorizers balance programmatic, political, and impact concerns. Implementers exhibit the broadest conception of success, placing particular emphasis on processes, stakeholders, capability, and enduring impact. Civic advocates prioritize fairness, participation, trust, and beneficiary outcomes. The findings suggest that policy disagreements arise not because actors disagree about whether success matters, but because they evaluate success from different vantage points.



Introduction

Many studies argue that the search for policy success is not a climb toward a single summit but a trek through a range of peaks. Mapping thirty criteria across six categories, for instance, Andrews (2022a) revealed just how multi-dimensional success can be. This does more than complicate academic definitions, however; it poses a practical challenge for those who must design, implement, assess, or defend policy. How can policy workers navigate such a landscape?



A first step in answering such question is to ask whether the various actors who populate a policy process—politicians, administrators, service providers, advocates, beneficiaries, and critics—are talking about the same thing when they invoke “success.” This question has been surprisingly neglected, with McConnell et al. (2020, p. 589) noting, for instance, that the issue of “policy success for whom” remains “important but under-researched.”

Scholarly neglect does not mean that the question is not constantly being raised. Consider, for instance, Australia’s 2011 carbon pricing reform. Historically, Australia has been one of the world’s highest per-capita emitters due to coal-based electricity and energy-intensive industry. By the late 2000s, emissions remained high and repeated attempts at climate legislation had stalled. The 2011 Clean Energy Act sought to change this by imposing a fixed charge on major emitters. Administratively and environmentally, the early results looked encouraging: electricity-

sector emissions fell seven to eleven percent relative to earlier years (Jotzo, 2012; MacNeil, 2021), renewable investment accelerated, and the wider economy continued to grow.

For the Gillard government, there were clear indicators of success—legislation was enacted, institutions were functioning, and emissions were declining. Energy-intensive firms instead viewed the policy through competitiveness and transition costs, with mixed assessments. Households focused on affordability and fairness as retail electricity prices rose eight to twelve percent in 2012–13 (Jericho, 2014). Opposition parties adopted an electoral frame, rebranding the scheme as a punitive “carbon tax” that would “destroy jobs,” “drive up power bills,” and “wreck the economy.”

These success frames never converged. A policy that seemed substantively and administratively successful to some thus became a symbol of economic unfairness and political overreach to others. After Gillard’s party lost the 2013 election, the scheme was repealed—with a brief environmental and administrative success giving way to a more enduring political failure (Crowley, 2017; Muiruri et al., 2024).

The example illustrates how disagreement about what counts as success can destabilize reform, even when core performance indicators are positive. But what kinds of disagreement should we expect in real policy work? What do different actors focus on when they invoke success and failure? How can we reconcile their differences? This paper tackles these questions directly, not as a theoretical puzzle, but as a practical inquiry into how people who make, authorize, deliver, advocate for, and evaluate policy define what it means to succeed.

I start by examining applied literature where researchers observe policy workers up close—public health, education, climate change, and international development—to learn what knowledge exists about different actors’ views on success. One pattern stands out clearly across the literature: different actors look for success in different places. To make sense of this pattern, the second section examines the “success perspectives” of four types of actors most practitioners will recognize: political authorizers, policy planners and designers, implementers, and civic advocates.

By analyzing a short survey of these actors, I find that all four groups care about success, but they concentrate on different focal points when judging whether policy work has succeeded or failed. These represent different success perspectives, where different policy actors’ prioritize different peaks on the wider success terrain.

I conclude by noting the practical challenge this poses for those who care about making and sustaining successful policy. If the success terrain is populated by many mountains, and different actors want to climb different peaks, how do we work together to achieve anything in common?

Learning from Literature

One way to understand how different actors think about policy success would be to identify all the actors involved in doing policy work and directly assess each actor's perspective on which success criteria they care most about. A full inquiry of this nature lies beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, I take a simpler exploratory approach—like Davis's (2014, 2018) work on project management success—that asks whether recognizable types of actors tend to focus on the same kinds of success.¹ Rather than mapping every actor, such inquiry asks whether common groups look at common peaks on the broader success terrain.

This is not straightforward. Policy processes differ across contexts, can be opaque, and often unfold in less tidy ways than many models imply, with different kinds of actors inhabiting shifting roles in different contexts (Cairney, 2021; Weible and Cairney, 2021). While recognizing these complexities, I take a simplified view of the policy process to facilitate analysis—parlaying what Colebatch (2006, p.32) calls the “authoritative account” of policy work; where the process is portrayed as a linear set of stages in which actors identify problems, choose responses, and ensure that these are implemented. While simplified, such account highlights four actor roles frequently referenced in applied writing and—I believe—widely recognized by practitioners (see Figure 1): civic advocates, who voice demands and articulate needs; political authorizers, who decide on and authorize action; designers, who craft policies and programs; and implementers, who deliver those programs to users and beneficiaries.

¹ Davis (2014) and Davis (2018, p.41) analyzed different stakeholder views of project management success by first defining key stakeholder groups (through a rigorous literature analysis) and then interviewing and surveying members of these groups to develop a view of “their common and differing views of success.”

Figure 1. Four Generic Actor Types in Policy Work



Applied literature from several domains provide insight into how these four groups think about success, suggesting that the different types of actors would often choose to climb different mountains if they had the chance. For instance, public health case management reforms in Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom illustrate sharp contrasts between how designers, implementers, and patient advocates see success. Studies show, for instance, that actors designing policies in central ministries tend to define success narrowly—as achieving program objectives like reduced emergency department usage or lower treatment costs (Hudon et al., 2017). Implementers and patient advocates, in contrast, define success more broadly, emphasizing relational and experiential dimensions—trust, patient satisfaction, and capability building. Knox et al. (2022, p.3), for instance, report that case managers implementing policies “frequently mentioned three characteristics of success: (1) establishing trust; (2) fostering change in patients’ mindset or initiative; and (3) promoting stability and independence.” Success was substantially “patient-defined” for these implementers, contrasting (and potentially conflicting) with the preferences designers have for operational and productivity metrics.

Education policy research reveals similar distinctions. Wallner (2008) examined reforms in Ontario and Alberta, where provincial designers prioritized narrow goals associated with cost efficiency—what she identified as a “performance, effectiveness, and efficiency” bias. Teachers, parents, and students, however, cared more about student well-being, legitimacy of the school system, and improvements in relationships within schools. In Ontario, designer criteria dominated, alienating other stakeholders and producing a reform that struggled to generate a

supportive political coalition. Wallner concludes, citing Weir (1992, p.193), that designer-driven strategies “undermine[d] the emergence of long-term political coalitions and enduring institutions needed to sustain policy direction.” In this case, success for designers meant meeting program goals; success for others meant strengthening the broader educational system.

Climate policymaking offers another instructive case. After ratifying the Kyoto Protocol in 2007, Australia introduced carbon pricing through the 2011 Clean Energy Act. As discussed in my introduction, policy designers regarded the policy as a success: the Act passed, emissions fell from 410 to 393 million tons between 2008 and 2013 (Ritchie, Roser, and Rosado, 2020), and Australia met its Kyoto targets. Civic actors and political opponents, however, framed the same policy as a failure—citing unfair distributional burdens and political overreach—and labeled it a “tax” that harmed households and industries (Newman and Head, 2015). Although the policy succeeded on technical, administrative, and environmental dimensions, it failed to maintain social license and political durability. The Labor government lost the 2013 election, and the Act was repealed in 2014. The Center for Public Impact (2017) concludes that “even though it did succeed in reducing emissions, [the reform] failed to get the support it needed.”

Viewed through the idea of success as a multi-peak success terrain, it appears that policy designers and authorizers in this case climbed one mountain (the program success associated with emissions reductions and legislative achievement), while other actors judged success from other peaks associated with fairness, legitimacy, endurance, and political expedience.

International development studies reinforce these distinctions. Diallo and Thuillier (2004) find that high-level project designers define success as producing deliverables on time, on budget, and according to donor-approved plans. Beneficiaries and civic advocates, in contrast, define success almost exclusively in terms of higher-level impact—whether conditions improved, results endured, and communities were satisfied. The authors write that “beneficiaries’ concerns reside only in project impact” while “all stakeholders but the coordinator appreciate impact” (Diallo and Thuillier, 2004, p.11). Lim and Mohamed (1999, p.244) summarize the tension succinctly: planners view success as achieving pre-determined goals, whereas “the general public do not necessarily have similar pre-determined goals regarding the project at all.”

Across this literature, the pattern is not that any group ignores success, but that they look for it on different peaks. Designers tend to focus on whether the policy or program is well-designed

and technically sound. Political authorizers look for visible results, political payoff, and endurance. Implementers attend to feasibility, processes, and stakeholder cooperation. Civic advocates look for fairness, distributional reach, and lived outcomes. All four care about success, but they prioritize different focal points when deciding whether a policy has succeeded or failed.

Surveying Practitioners

As discussed, the literature suggests that different actors have different success focal points. But is that true in practice? To explore this, I conducted a targeted survey of policy designers, political authorizers, implementers, and civic advocates—asking how often they consider various success criteria. Drawing on the empirical method adopted by Davis (2014, 2018), the goal was to solicit the views of a specific set of elite actors occupying roles with distinct vantage points on policy success, not a broad population of policy workers.

For this purpose, I surveyed four cohorts of fifty former executive education students who I knew held practitioner positions aligning with all four roles. I communicated with each group separately, to keep responses separate, after defining membership: Designers were actors who I knew were in positions to determine what a policy or project will do and plan how it will do so, including planners in governments and international development agencies; Political authorizers were executive-branch politicians who I knew had the job of sponsoring policy initiatives, make resourcing decisions, and actively authorize work;² Implementers were people who I knew held roles as street-level administrative agents responsible for execution and frontline delivery;³ Civic advocates were actors I knew represented constituencies in policy discussions, often through entities like chambers of business, local associations, and civil society intermediaries.

My survey instrument was simple. I shared the list of potential success criteria shown in Andrews (2022a) (and in Table 1, below, which also summarizes results) and asked respondents: “How often would you personally consider each criterion when assessing policy success?” Responses followed a five-point scale, where 1 = never, 2 = seldom, 3 = sometimes,

² I limited the category of political authorizers to executive-branch actors, who serve as active policy patrons: they decide on policies and then sponsor, resource, and defend their implementation. I did not include legislative politicians, who may shape policy agendas but generally authorize work more passively.

³ Some studies classify high-level administrators—such as World Bank project coordinators—as implementers (Diallo & Thuillier 2004; Ika et al. 2010). I instead focused on street-level implementers. Higher-level coordinators are typically removed from delivery, acting as stewards of plans and resources, whereas frontline actors engage directly in execution and adaptation.

4 = often, and 5 = always. Before fielding the instrument, I pre-tested it with eight former students (two in each group) and conducted a short debrief. This helped refine language and ensure criteria were clear across roles. The intent was not to build a predictive model but to reveal patterns in how often different actors attend to different success criteria, testing whether practitioners' perspectives reflected the differences suggested by the literature I had already reviewed.

The final sample included 36 designers, 37 implementers, 26 political authorizers, and 22 civic advocates, yielding response rates between 44 percent and 74 percent. Respondents represented a wide geographical spread: 36 percent from Africa, 19 percent from Latin America, 15 percent from Europe, 12 percent each from North America and Asia, and 7 percent from the Middle East. All respondents confirmed more than five years of experience in their relevant role, and 54 percent reported more than ten years. Although the total sample was small, it was substantively credible for the purposes of this study: each group contained respondents who clearly occupied the roles of interest and had substantive experience from which to judge policy success.

Importantly, response rates themselves compare favorably to similar studies. In project management research, Davis (2018) surveyed 300 potential respondents and received 143 usable responses (a 48 percent response rate), which she notes is close to the field average. Against that benchmark, the response rates for the four groups in this survey fall within the "average to high" range—appropriate for a smaller, targeted sample. Comparable work has often proceeded with even smaller respondent numbers: Pinto and Slevin (1987) analyzed project success using 52 usable responses; Toor and Ogunlana (2010) based their study on 76 responses; and Pinto, Rouhiainen, and Trailer (2009) used 92 responses from a sample of 150.

Assessing response bias was difficult. While I knew the full list of individuals I had contacted, responses were anonymous, making it impossible to determine who did and did not complete the survey. Of the invitational emails I sent, 43 bounced due to outdated addresses, which plausibly explains more than half of the non-responses. The remaining 34 non-responses could not be tracked or categorized. However, given the size, anonymity, and professional distribution of the final sample, I concluded that the responses were sufficiently balanced to offer a modest but meaningful view into how each group thinks about success.

Different Actors, Different Views on Success

Table 1 reports the average frequency with which respondents in each actor group indicated they would consider each of the 30 listed criteria when assessing policy success. Responses range from 1 (“never”) to 5 (“always”). Across all groups, average scores are generally above the midpoint of the scale, indicating that most practitioners recognize all the criteria and consider success multidimensional rather than singular.

However, average scores vary both across criteria and across groups. Some criteria cluster at the higher end of the scale—especially those related to goal achievement, net societal impact, legality and corruption, and beneficiary/user satisfaction—while others fall closer to the middle, including for cost and time efficiency, political considerations, and capability-building concerns. Differences are also visible across actor groups, with designers tending to record higher averages on program-related criteria and implementers and civic advocates tending to record higher averages on stakeholder and process-related criteria. Political authorizers display a mixed set of preferences between these two poles.

Table 1. Average Scores for Four Actor Groups’ Views on What Matters in Success

Success Category & Criterion	Designers (n=36)	Political Authorizers (n=26)	Implementers (n=37)	Civic Advocates (n=22)
A. Program Success				
1. Program is formally approved and funded	3.80	3.65	3.40	3.45
2. Program responds to accepted needs/problems	4.00	4.00	3.45	4.05
3. Program technically/administratively feasible	4.05	3.40	3.45	3.30
4. Activities and outputs delivered as planned	4.10	3.60	4.00	3.45
5. Work is cost-efficient	3.90	3.80	3.90	3.40
6. Work is time-efficient	3.25	3.20	3.45	3.25
7. Program goals achieved as defined	4.63	4.15	4.15	4.15
B. Impact, Distribution & Endurance				
8. Positive net societal impact	3.70	4.15	4.20	4.20
9. No unacceptable gains/losses	3.40	4.05	3.90	4.05
10. Work/results endure and scale	3.80	3.90	4.15	3.95
11. Work catalyzes new ideas/activities	3.20	3.30	3.80	3.80
C. Capability Success				
12. Uses/builds existing capabilities	3.25	3.25	4.05	3.25
13. Builds new capabilities	3.20	3.40	4.00	3.70
14. Improves confidence/motivation	3.10	3.25	3.65	3.20
D. Political Success				
15. Sufficient political support	3.20	3.45	3.80	3.65

Success Category & Criterion	Designers (n=36)	Political Authorizers (n=26)	Implementers (n=37)	Civic Advocates (n=22)
16. Resistance manageable	3.35	3.45	4.15	3.40
17. Enhances patrons' reputation/influence	3.30	4.25	3.45	3.30
18. Yields positive electoral effects	3.30	4.10	3.50	3.30
E. Stakeholder Success				
19. Implementers support objectives	3.10	3.30	4.05	3.40
20. Users satisfied/supportive	3.45	3.45	4.10	4.15
21. Beneficiaries satisfied/supportive	3.60	4.10	4.15	4.15
22. Financing entities provide support	4.00	3.20	3.80	3.20
23. Public administration provides support	3.05	3.10	3.30	3.15
24. Citizens provide support	3.25	3.65	3.40	3.55
25. Builds trust in government policy	3.35	3.60	3.80	4.00
F. Process Success				
26. Work perceived as legal/non-corrupt	4.20	4.20	4.30	4.05
27. Process inclusive, participatory, transparent	3.40	3.60	4.05	4.00
28. Process/distribution perceived as fair	3.35	3.70	3.80	4.00
29. Processes respected (as appropriate)	3.20	3.20	4.00	3.65
30. Processes flexible (allow adaptations)	3.10	3.20	4.00	3.20

Notes: Based on survey responses. 1 = Never, 2 = Seldom, 3 = Sometimes, 4 = Often, 5 = Always. Dark cell indicates a primary concern for the actor group; a lighter cell indicates a secondary concern for the actor group.

Primary and Secondary Success Concerns

I identified primary and secondary success concerns for each group to obtain a sense of the focal points of each group—the criteria their responses suggest are most prioritized when thinking about success. Primary concerns are criteria that average respondents in each group said they “often” or “always” consider (where the group average score is 4.0 or above and most respondents answered 4 or 5). Secondary concerns are criteria where most respondents also answered “often” or “always,” but with a greater share using lower-frequency responses, resulting in an average between 3.5 and 4. The remaining criteria—where most respondents indicated “sometimes,” “seldom,” or “never”—are treated as non-concerns.

Applying this shading protocol yields the first notable observation from the table: designers have markedly fewer primary and secondary concerns than other groups, indicating a narrower success perspective. This narrower perspective is consistent with the literature discussed, which suggests that designers focus more on programmatic performance, goal achievement, and

administrative/technical soundness than on distributional, political, stakeholder, or process issues (Davis, 2014, 2018; Diallo and Thuillier, 2004; Wallner, 2008; Lim and Mohamed, 1999).

To compare breadth systematically, I calculated a weighted sum of primary and secondary concerns for each group and expressed this as a percentage share of the 30 potential criteria. Primary concerns scored one-point, secondary concerns half a point. Results are shown in Table 2, which shows that designers average 8.5 weighted concerns (28% of the set), compared to 12 concerns for political authorizers (40%), 18 concerns for implementers (60%), and 13 concerns for civic advocates (43%).

Table 2. Breadth of success perspectives, by actor group

Measure	Designers	Political Authorizers	Implementers	Civic Advocates
Number of primary concerns*	6	8	14	10
Number of secondary concerns**	5	8	8	6
Weighted concerns (primary + secondary)***	8.5	12	18	13
Share of weighted concerns (out of 30)****	28%	40%	60%	43%

Source: Author's analysis of survey results. *Notes:* * Primary concerns are criteria where most respondents answered "often" or "always" (scores 4 or 5) and the group average score ≥ 4 ; ** Secondary concerns are criteria where most respondents answered "often" or "always," but the group average score < 4 ; *** Weighted as: primary = 1; secondary = 0.5; **** Weighted concerns divided by the full set of 30 criteria.

The largest difference in Table 2 is between designers and implementers, with implementers reporting more than twice as many success mountains of concern than designers. These results align closely with the expectation, grounded in literature, that those working at the "street level" view policy success through broader and more relational lenses than those involved in high-level policy formulation and design.

A second difference relates not to the breadth of concerns but to their distribution across success dimensions. We can see this by examining the share of each group's weighted concerns distributed across the success dimensions (see Table 3). This reveals a pattern that aligns closely with applied literature. Designer perspectives are less distributed and highly concentrated in the program success dimension, which accounts for 59 percent of their weighted concerns—spread across just four dimensions. This designer concentration is more than double the concentration of any dimension for any other group (where the next highest single-dimension concentration is 27 percent, for stakeholder and process success among civic advocates).

Table 3. Distribution (as percentage) of success perspectives, by category and actor group

Success Category	Designers	Political Authorizers	Implementers	Civic Advocates
A. Program success	59%	29%	13%	15%
B. Impact, distribution, and endurance	12%	21%	17%	23%
C. Capability success	0%	0%	14%	4%
D. Political success	0%	17%	8%	4%
E. Stakeholder success	18%	17%	22%	27%
F. Process success	12%	17%	25%	27%

Source: Author's analysis of survey responses from practitioners. *Note:* Percentages indicate the share of each group's weighted success perspective comprised by criteria in the specified dimension.

The patterns for political authorizers, implementers, and civic advocates look quite different from one another—and different again from designers. Political authorizers spread concerns across five dimensions, with program success (29 percent), political success (17 percent), stakeholder success (17 percent), process success (17 percent), and impact and endurance success (21 percent) each featuring within a relatively narrow band. This broad mix reflects the multiple accountabilities that the political executives must navigate: they must care that the program works, that it delivers visible impact, that it can survive politically, and that key stakeholders can tolerate both the process and the outcomes.

Implementers exhibit the broadest and most distributed success profile in the sample. Their weighted concerns span all six dimensions, with only 13 percent of concerns anchored in program success and the largest shares located in stakeholder success (22 percent) and process success (25 percent). Substantial additional attention is placed on capability success (14 percent) and impact/distribution/endurance success (17 percent). This accords with the rich practitioner literature on street-level bureaucracy, community development, and public health delivery, where implementation success is conceived less as programmatic compliance and more as whether relationships hold, beneficiaries engage, processes feel fair, frontline capacity is built, and the work is likely to endure (Lipsky 1980; Knox et al. 2022; Hudon et al. 2017). Implementers are the group most exposed to the demands of real people, real organizations, and real constraints; their success perspective reflects that grounded, relational, and problem-facing vantage point.

Civic advocates also distribute concerns across all six dimensions, but with a distinctive weighting. Stakeholder success (27 percent) and process success (27 percent) together account for over half of their weighted concerns, followed by impact/distribution/endurance (23

percent). They place markedly less weight on program success (15 percent) and almost none on political or capability success. This configuration is consistent with studies of advocacy groups, community organizations, and citizen-facing intermediaries, which show a repeated focus on distributional fairness, procedural inclusion, legitimacy, transparency, and whether beneficiaries and constituencies feel represented and satisfied (Sullivan et al. 2004; Bovens et al. 2001; Wallner 2008). For advocates, success is only partially about “whether the program worked” and much more about whether the policy worked for the right people, in the right way, and with the right respect for participation, process, justice, and voice.

Disaggregating non-program concerns sharpens the contrast further. Designers identify only two primary non-program concerns—legality and non-corruption (process) and support from financing entities (stakeholder)—plus a short list of secondary concerns spanning impact, durability, and beneficiary satisfaction. In contrast, non-program success concerns make up 11 of 16 focal points for political authorizers, 19 of 22 for implementers, and 14 of 16 for civic advocates. The evidence reveals some convergence across these three groups, with implementers and civic advocates especially oriented toward relational, distributional, and procedural dimensions, and political authorizers balancing these with programmatic and political criteria.

Finally, the survey results reveal a particular emphasis among designers on goal achievement as the archetypal program success criterion. Every designer in the sample selected “often” or “always” for this item (yielding an average of 4.63, the table’s highest). This mirrors findings from Wallner’s (2008) study of education reform in Ontario and Alberta, Knox et al.’s (2022) study of case management in health policy, and Diallo and Thuillier’s (2004) examination of development projects, where program designers are seen to repeatedly equate success with whether a policy “worked as planned” and meets predefined targets.

In the survey here, designers anchor success most tightly to this single criterion, whereas implementers and civic advocates anchor success more to beneficiary satisfaction, fairness, and process quality, and political authorizers spread attention across program, impact, and politics.

Conclusion

The findings suggest that different actors see success differently, with Figure 2 showing that the four different actor types having very different focal points.

Figure 2. How the Four Actor Types Prioritizes Success Concerns



These results reinforce a long-standing proposition in the public policy literature: policy success is inherently multidimensional and contingent, and different actors evaluate it through different lenses and narratives, and stakes. The results also echo a view held by McConnell et al. (2020, p.590) that different stakeholders can have “significantly different ‘success’ experiences,” such that evaluators should always ask, “policy success for whom?” A similar sentiment appears in Sullivan et al. (2004, p.1603), who note that different “stakeholders ... have varying perspectives on impact,” and Bovens et al. (2001, p.20), who argue that “success and failure mean different things to different people at different times.” We see a similar perspective in Luetjens et al. (2019, p.5), who posit that, “different stakeholders have different vantage points, values and interests with regard to a policy” and thus judge success through distinct frames.

Differences in success and failure views becomes weighty, however, when placed alongside a second strand of policy and project scholarship which holds that policy actors need to agree on what success means if they have any chance of achieving such. Evincing this view, Wolman (1981, 439) famously argued that clear and agreed objectives are required to ensure policy success. Beleiu et al. (2015, 64–65) similarly hold that project managers rate “clearly defined goals and directions” and common “compliance with [agreed] performance criteria” as vital to achieve success. FitzGerald et al. (2019, 9) note similarly that, “for policies to be successful, they should have clear, agreed, and achievable goals.” Additionally, Siriporananon and

Visuthismajarn (2018, p.274) show that disaster management initiatives succeed when “every[one] shares the same objectives... [and] work[s] together toward the same goal.”

The Australia emissions control case I started this paper with illustrates the consequences of having multiple actors who do not work together toward the same goal—or agree what the goal is (or should be). The administration that designed and implemented the emissions trading law considered their policy intervention successful because emissions fell—an outcome aligned with their goal-based, programmatic definition of success. Households and firms, however, interpreted success through distributional and cost lenses, bemoaning the increased burden of higher energy costs. Opposition parties had an even different view, framing the law in terms of political legitimacy; and civic groups focused on endurance.

The result was a clash of success perspectives: the policy “worked” for some—for a while—but failed for others and did not ultimately endure.

Such story exemplifies Lim and Mohamed’s (1999, p.243) reminder that success partly depends on “who determines” it. Such reminder also raises a practical question: “If success looks different from different vantage points, how do policy actors ever get on the same page?” I raise this question recognizing that agreement is hard when the underlying evaluative criteria are plural and actors inhabit different organizational, political, and temporal worlds. The question reveals a tension at the heart of policy work, however: what do we do if alignment about what success looks like is necessary to achieve success yet alignment around one criterion of success might undermine achieving success in the broader, relational, political, and temporal sense?

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