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Why are policy innovations rare and so often negative? Blame avoidance and problem denial in climate change policy-making

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ABSTRACT

While many studies have put forward prescriptions for action on climate change it is not clear under what conditions policy innovations are likely to be pursued or what form they will take. It is the purpose of this paper to bring some clarity to these subjects. The paper follows Hood in describing policy-makers in democratic polities as highly risk-averse and therefore unlikely to take policy action unless the circumstances and the nature of the problem they face are propitious. It also suggests that when actions are taken these are not always 'positive' – that is oriented towards dealing with the objective manifestations of a problem – but can also be 'negative' – that is, geared towards denial of a problem or its rejection. The paper examines the literature on policy failure and success in order to isolate several dimensions of failure which decision-makers would like to avoid. It then combines these elements to construct a two stage model of decision-making which identifies which types of problems and circumstances are likely to lead to innovative activity and which are not. This model is then applied to the case of activities for climate change mitigation and adaptation.

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1. Introduction: policy failures, innovation failures and climate change policy-making

Climate change policy-making is often labelled a failure (see, for example, Harris, 2007; Latin, 2012; Pielke, 2010; Bryner, 2008). But what does it mean to be a failure and why has this happened? And what role does policy innovation (Polsby, 1984) or its lack play in policy success and failure? Does a failure to innovate lead to overall policy failure? Or do failed policy innovations contribute to such outcomes? These and other questions are significant ones in understanding the role policy innovations have played in climate change policy-making. The record of both innovations and failures to innovate in the sector raises a host of questions about which variables have caused many climate change mitigation and adaptation efforts to succeed or fail and why this has happened (Compston and Bailey, 2012; Lockwood, 2013).

Until recently, determining exactly what constitutes policy success and failure has been a subject of some contention in the policy sciences (Grant, 2009) and poor definition of the dependent variable has interfered with the ability of observers to conclude precisely what the relationship is between policy innovation and policy outcomes. The most common way to define the two concepts has been to treat policy failures as the reverse of policy success: in the sense that whatever doesn't succeed is a failure. McConnell (2010a), for example, defined policy success as the condition which obtains when a policy "achieves the goals that proponents set out to achieve and attracts no criticism of any significance and/or support is virtually universal" (p. 351) while defining policy failure as "a policy fails insofar as it does not achieve the goals that proponents set out to achieve and no longer receives support from them" (2010b, p. 62).

Using such a definition, for many analyses of the climate change area such as those cited above, a failure is considered to have occurred simply because a stated policy initiative did not correct or resolve a policy problem, that is, in purely programmatic terms (Howlett, 2012). Many of the articles in this special issue, like others in the literature on mitigation and adaptation (Giest and Howlett, 2012; Hegger et al., 2012) address the development of policy innovations and their dissemination from this standpoint. But as McConnell (2010a,b) also pointed out, policy success and failure are complex sequences of events, with overall outcomes related not only to programme structure, but also to the political and process aspects of policy-making. Both *policy failure*, or the inability of a policy to correct or resolve a problem and the issue of *innovation failure*, that is, the failure for policy innovations to be adopted in the first place, require analysis along all three of these dimensions.

This article addresses these aspects of climate change policy-making by developing a general model of policy (in)action based

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Table 1
Components of public policies involved in policy designs.

		Policy level		
		High level abstraction	*Programme level operationalization*	*Specific on-the-ground measures*
Policy element	*Policy goals*	*General abstract policy aims* The most general macro-level statement of government aims and ambitions in a specific policy area	*Operationalizable policy objectives* The specific meso-level areas that policies are expected to address in order to achieve policy aims	*Specific policy targets* The specific, on-the-ground, micro-requirements necessary to attain policy objectives
	Policy means	*General policy implementation preferences* The long-term preferences of government in terms of the types of organizational devices used in addressing policy aims	*Operationalizable policy tools* The specific types of governing instruments to be used to address programme level objectives	*Specific policy tool calibrations* The specific 'settings' of policy tools required to attain policy targets

Source: Howlett and Cashore (2009).

on the concept of blame-avoidance in government (Weaver, 1989; Hood, 2002, 2010a). It argues that the failure of substantive policy innovations to appear in many jurisdictions is the result of a common political calculus, what Hood (2010a) has called a 'negativity bias', or risk aversion, among decision-makers. It is this bias which leads decision-makers, like many of the subjects investigated by behavioural economics (Tversky et al., 1982) to engage in a specific kind of risk averse behaviour: striving to avoid responsibility for any adverse consequences of their actions. Decision-makers desire to avoid blame for failures, it is argued, leads them first to attempt to avoid any action at all and then only when forced to do so by the threat of blame for inaction to undertake as little action as possible. The climate change case in particular reveals the extent to which this behaviour can extend, when even the little action that is undertaken is less positive 'substantive' action designed to ameliorate a social condition or problem, but rather 'negative' and primarily procedural activity, attacking opponents and even denying a problem exists in order to continue to justify support for the *status quo*.

2. Policy innovations and the elements of policy

As Jordan and Huitema (in this issue) note, a major part of the difficulty involved in understanding the nature of policy innovations in general stems from the fact that, regardless of which sector they involve, innovations can come in many different forms and shapes. Multiple definitions are used in the study of the term and studies often refer to somewhat different meanings of what constitutes an innovation in the policy realm. Sometimes an innovation is treated as involving the development of a novel policy ("invention"), sometimes the adoption of a policy used in another jurisdiction ("diffusion") and sometimes to refer to a significantly new policy impact or outcome. Policy impacts and policy diffusion are the subjects of other articles in this special issue and this article focuses on non-status quo novel policy activity as a benchmark and measure of innovation.

As Howlett and Cashore (2009) argued, policies exist as collections of goals and means combining elements such as abstract policy aims and implementation preferences, programme objectives and tools, and specific policy targets and tool calibrations. In other words, policies have instrumental and ideational components, means and ends, which exist in a complex relationship involving different degrees of abstraction and proximity to on-the-ground policy targets (Kay, 2007), and innovations can occur in some or all of these different elements or components of a policy (see Table 1). Policy innovations can thus be thought of as changes to existing policy practices which introduce non-status quo, if not necessarily entirely novel, policy components or combinations of components which often result in new outcomes (Polsby, 1984).

Innovations can occur in any of the quadrants set out in Table 1 but the policy sciences in general have suggested that some general rules apply with respect to changes from the status quo, such that some of these innovations, *prima facie*, are more likely to occur than others (Howlett et al., 2009; Jordan and Huitema, in this issue; Hall, 1993; Cashore and Howlett, 2007). Tool re-calibrations, for example, occur regularly as a result of policy evaluations and reviews undertaken by a plethora of policy actors (Howlett et al., 2009) but often have little impact on outcomes or the general tenor of policy in a sector.

Such small or minor changes, as pointed out in the Introduction to this issue, are of less interest in the study of policy innovations than those which involve shifts in instruments and goals themselves (Jordan and Huitema, in this issue). Such shifts in general policy aims and tools, however, are expected to occur much less frequently (Hall, 1993). Similarly, some innovations may be relatively short-lived, such as 'policy experiments' or pilot projects which are never 'scaled up' (Vreugdenhil et al., 2012; Martin and Sanderson, 1999; Stoker and John, 2009; Hoffman, 2011), while others can be more long-lasting and quasi-permanent in nature. Innovations are also not limited to substantive actions designed to alter actual conditions on the ground, but can also take a more procedural orientation (Howlett, 2000). And the procedural actions a government can undertake can be 'negative' – i.e. engage in the politics of problem denial and supporter denigration (Saward, 1992; Cobb and Ross, 1997) – as well as 'positive' – i.e. oriented towards supporting a substantive policy initiative intended to address a problem.

Policy tools, in general, as Hood (1986) argued, can be distinguished according to what kind of governing resource they employ: nodality or information, authority, finance or treasure, or organizational resources (Howlett, 2011b). Positive procedural innovations are oriented towards using these resources to support substantive actions intended to deal with or resolve the objective manifestations of a problem such as creating an advisory committee of anti-smoking groups to accompany efforts to limit tobacco consumption through advertising, taxes and regulation. 'Negative' procedural innovations also exist, however, and are geared towards activities such as propaganda or discouragement of interest group formation or the denial of a problem or its rejection in order to limit or eliminate the need for more substantive action (Goodin, 1980; Saward, 1992). Table 2 provides some examples of negative and positive procedural tools based on Hood's classification.

Another part of the complexity involved in describing and assessing policy innovations, in the climate change sector in particular, stems from the fact that the overall goals associated with many policies are several and may not be treated in an equal or integrated fashion (Capano, 2009). Thus policies in a sector like

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