

‘Democratic breakdown is mostly a consequence of policy failure.’ Discuss.

Policy failure: the cause or the symptom

I. Introduction

Following the “third wave of democratisation” (Huntington, 2012) many scholars pointed to a reverse wave, in which the number of authoritarian regimes is on the rise. Although, it is still premature to announce the “end of democracy” (Lührmann and Lindberg, 2019), acknowledging the trends of democratic breakdown is nonetheless crucial. In this essay, I argue that policy failure proves to be insufficient in explaining democratic breakdowns, as it cannot fully describe the incumbent’s abuse of democracy. Instead, I emphasise how the interplay of social divisions and state capacity play a crucial role in democratic breakdowns. First, I start by outlining what policy failure is, and how it is linked to state capacity. Following that, I acknowledge the importance policy failure in some cases and recognise why it fails generally. Finally, I introduce a more holistic approach that incorporates the notion of policy failure in the discussion on social cleavages, institutional arrangements, and democratic breakdown.

II. Policy failure and state capacity

To begin the analysis of the consequences of policy failure on democracy, one must understand what the literature considers a policy failure. In my explanation, I resort to Allan McConnell’s (2015) definition, as in his research he made a compelling argument that could serve as a basis for analysis. He identifies numerous difficulties to defining policy failure which then proves its contested nature (ibid., p.11). Among others, the main challenges posed to scholars of policy failure are the differing perceptions, benchmarks, and the question of “failure to whom?” (ibid., pp.6-10). Considering these limitations McConnell states the following:

“A policy fails, even if it is successful in some minimal respects, if it does not fundamentally achieve the goals that proponents set out to achieve and opposition is great and/or support is virtually non-existent.” (McConnell, 2015, p.10)

The components of the analysis (goals, proponents and support) echo Theda Skocpol’s definition of state capacity (1985, p.9) who argues that state capacity is the extent to which official goals can be implemented in the face of potential or actual opposition. I do not assert that the two are synonymous, just that the goals and actors in the examination of the two concepts are vastly similar. Even though, different scholars interpret state capacity in various ways, they seem to interchange it with government capacity (Bao, 2022, p.87). The reason could be that, as Weber stated, the state is the claimant to the monopoly of violence (2004, p.33) but “[t]he actual institution

that monopolises violence is the government” (Bao, 2022, p.87). Hence, regardless of the nuances of the definitions, policy implementation and government capacity can be understood as intrinsically connected. Especially, if one accepts policy as processes (McConnell, 2015, p.12) in which governments try to achieve authoritative approval for particular policy initiatives (ibid., p.16). This is to say that the failure to secure legitimacy and preserve policy instruments (ibid., p.13) can and most probably will jeopardise government capacity in a democracy. However, if policy failure can be understood even in the broadest of meanings (loss of legitimacy), how is it insufficient in explaining democratic breakdown? I devote the subsequent section to this discussion with specific focus to “endogenous democratic termination” (Maeda, 2010).

III. Why policy failure is insufficient?

Policy failure does not play an equal role in each regime type’s functioning (de Mesquita et al., 1999). Not only is policy implementation innately linked to state capacity, I argue, but it constitutes only an element of the equation. Put it differently, it fails to provide compelling explanatory value for democratic breakdowns because policy failure is only part of what one might consider government capacity. This can be seen in Gangsheng Bao’s (2022, pp.84–89) account on the matter, where policy implementation is only an implicit factor that contributes to state capacity. Nowadays, endogenous democratic termination is the most common initiator of breakdowns (Miller, 2021, p.198; Lührmann and Lindberg, 2019, p.1095). For new democracies, that are still fragile (Bao, 2022, p.8), if failure is repeated it does not only mean that the incumbent will be replaced but that the dissatisfaction will give rise to doubts about the value of democracy as a whole (Svolik, 2013, p.34). A case supporting this argument could be of El Salvador. The “coolest dictator in the world”, Nayib Bukele, reverted the country to autocracy from previously established (procedural) democratic measures (Gellman, 2022). He gained soaring support (see Al Jazeera 2024) on the back of iron-fist policies towards gang-violence against which his predecessors failed to fight (Gellman, 2022). This case is in line with the argument that new democracies consolidate against coups faster than against incumbent takeovers (Svolik, 2015). However, if one accepts policy failure as an indicator of ineffective governments, they can also see data which proves that democratic support, by and large, is immune the “crises of performance” (Claassen and Magalhães, 2022). In addition, not only freshly democratised countries face the possibility of breakdown (see Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018; Schiering, 2016). Policy failure alone could hardly serve as a singular explanatory variable to the termination of democracy, for instance, in Hungary or Tunisia, in cases where it is argued that the (endogenous) termination is caused by the polarisation of the economic elite (Schiering, 2016) or the disengagement of the electorate (Koehler, 2023). It certainly has its merits in describing some cases of the breakdowns happening historically. Particularly, it could be

argued, when exogenous involvement subverts democracy to end the active mismanagement and corruption of the incumbent. Yet, even in those instances, the complex nature of democratic resilience calls for a more nuanced approach that might more accurately depict both endogenous and exogenous terminations.

IV. An alternative theory

As illustrated in Figure 1, a more compelling explanation can be found in Bao's *Politics of Democratic Breakdown* (2022). By comparing 5 historical cases, Bao makes the argument that a high degree in voter fragmentation (let it be economic, ethnic, and alike) can lead to severe political conflicts, and

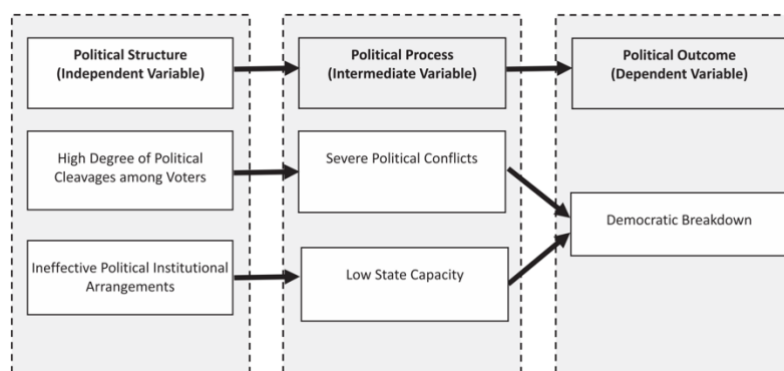


Figure 1 (Bao, 2022, p.20)

if there is a low state capacity that can not effectively resolve or contain the conflict, then there is a higher chance of democratic breakdown (ibid.). Bao argues that his approach does not only sets the social cleavage tradition and the institutional tradition parallel to each other, but it presents an original causal mechanism to explaining democratic breakdown (ibid.). Compared to democratic breakdown as the consequence of policy failure, this account offers an overarching explanation to the issue. The policy failure approach puts excessive emphasis on the agency of political actors without considering what institutional circumstances influence policies (even as processes) and to whom those policies respond to (i.e. society with all its divides). In spite of this, the two models could benefit from one another, and a more serious consideration could be given to a theory that conflates both approaches.

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