

Articles

Politics or Bureaucratic Failures? Understanding the Dynamics of Policy Failures in Democratic Governance

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This study seeks to advance our understanding of policy failures as the nexus of politics and bureaucratic failure. In doing so, it presents a typology to illustrate different types of policy failures by the degree of bureaucratic capacities and politics/political incentives involved in a policy problem, and explores two cases of such failures in South Korea. This study claims that policy failures are joint products of political and bureaucratic failures to varying degrees and that the discussion of both sides helps to enhance accountability and avoid political blame games and bureau-bashing.

This study reflects on two Korean cases to demonstrate politically-driven and administratively-driven failures in the high- and low-capacity bureaucracy and their consequences. These cases also reveal the dynamic nature of policy failures moving from one category to another during the policy processes.

The first case concerns the failure in emergency response of the Korea Coast Guard (KCG) during and after the sinking of the ferry MV Sewol. A low bureaucratic capacity and lack of motivation to fulfill their function may be the direct cause of the failure, which will be the focus of the discussion of bureaucratic failure. Yet, it also reveals aspects of political failures before and after the accident, where politicians have failed to provide a bureaucratic agency with autonomy and stacked the deck against a less salient agency for political or electoral gains.

The second case discusses the politics of preliminary feasibility studies (PFS) required for major public projects. This case explores policy failures uniquely manifested in a highly capable bureaucracy, which shows how politics-laden issues plant the seeds of policy failures driven by the prompt implementation of flawed decisions. The discussion section further discusses key arguments and implications drawn from the case studies. The final section offers concluding thoughts and avenues for future research.

Introduction

Policy failures occur at any phase of policy processes and lead to detrimental and often irreversible consequences. This study seeks to advance our understanding of policy failures as the nexus of politics and bureaucratic failure by illustrating two different types of policy failures in South Korea. The political-bureaucratic relationships are adaptive (Weingast, 2005; Wood & Waterman, 1991, 1993), and the distinctions between political and administrative responsibilities become less clear as the pyramid goes up within the Weberian bureaucracy. This study claims that policy failures are joint products of political and bureaucratic failures to varying degrees, and that the discussion of both sides helps to enhance accountability and avoid political blame games and bureau-bashing.

Due to the problems of democratic governance inherent to politics-administration relationships, both political and bureaucratic dysfunctions contribute to policy failures more or less. However, they are often regarded as an out-

come of bureaucratic pathologies rather than politics or political failures (Compton & Meier, 2017; Goodsell, 2004; Meier et al., 2019). It is worth noting several reasons why bureaucracies are most blamed for policy failures. First, numerous policies are made and implemented by public bureaucracies at different levels of government. Although political institutions often stall and stumble in performing their jobs supporting bureaucracies to solve problems, political decisions and acts of the states are often immune to judicial investigation and punishment as long as they were determined under procedural legitimacy. Along with the notion that government is wasteful, incompetent, and abusive, bureaucracy is often described as apathetic, unwilling, rigid, complacent, and rent-seeking (Goodsell, 2004).

Second, the lack of a clear conceptualization of policy failures may have contributed to the confusion and bias against bureaucracy. Policy failures (also known as policy fiasco, policy blunders, and policy disasters) have been studied in various lines of literature—political science, public administration, policy evaluation, and emergency manage-

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ment (Bovens & t'Hart, 1996; McConnell, 2015). It is often difficult to define the failure or success of value-oriented public policies in different stages of the policy cycle. The distinction between success and failure in policy outcomes is not dichotomous, and conceptualizing policy failures involves several methodological difficulties (McConnell, 2015). Policy failures may or may not be failures depending on when, where, and by whom they are evaluated. Bovens & t'Hart (1996, p. 21) highlighted the difficulty of the definition by arguing that "Failure is not inherent in policy events themselves. 'Failure' is a judgment about events." McConnell (2015 p. 221) described it as a maze, given "any search for a scientific, unambiguous, and value-free definition of policy failure would face serious difficulty in being able to cope with the complex, contested, and often ambiguous realities of policy outcomes."

In this study, public policy is broadly defined as a course of action by government entities or representatives, and policy failures describe a state of failing to achieve an intended goal of a policy at any stage of the policy cycle, including non-implementation or unsuccessful implementation (Hogwood & Gunn, 1984; McConnell, 2015). Policy failures encompass bureaucratic failures and failures of politics or political failures that attend to either bureaucratic or political institutions being handicapped in their functions or bureaucrats' and politicians' attitudinal and/or behavioral characteristics causing policy failures. As a related concept used in public choice and political economy, government failure refers to inefficiencies or unintended consequences from government intervention often as opposed to market failure (Tullock et al., 2002). Government failure has been used as a synonym for bureaucratic failure without conceptual clarity.

Another reason for bureaucracy being recognized as the main culprit of policy failures may be related to media attention and its tendency to blame the most directly responsible actor for inefficient implementation. Failures attract media coverage, which significantly affects organizational reputation and "frames the subsequent electoral environment" (Bertelli et al., 2015, p. 1179; Maor, 2010). In addition, policy failures often lead to political blame games where politicians often stack the deck against bureaucracy as a collective entity and make excuses to mitigate their responsibility (Bertelli, 2008; Hood, 2002; Nielsen & Moynihan, 2016; Weingast, 2005). Blaming bureaucracy or bureau-bashing is an effective strategy for politicians, as policy failures are often attributed to bureaucracies' inefficient implementation, administration, and regulation. However, less attention has been given to political failures in providing clear goals, resources, and autonomy, competing mandates, resulting in failing bureaucracy in solving problems and creating incentives for bureaucratic pathologies (Carrigan, 2018; Meier et al., 2019). In addition to the media attention, there is a trend in public policy and administration scholarship to reveal and reflect on failures or worst scenarios in the past rather than to discover and benchmark successes or exemplary cases, while the latter is a common practice in other academic fields, e.g., business administration.

This study presents a typology to illustrate different types of policy failures and explores two cases of South Ko-

rea where politics are highly polarized and administrative systems are relatively efficient but centralized. In the next section, four types of policy failures are presented by the degree of bureaucratic capacities and politics/political incentives involved in a policy problem, arguing that policy failures are to be understood as the nexus of politics and bureaucratic failures. Policy failures are attributed to ineffective implementation of desired policies as well as effective implementation of flawed policies by capable bureaucracies. According to this typology, the third section reflects on cases to demonstrate politically-driven and administratively-driven failures or faulty handling of a policy problem in the high- and low-capacity bureaucracy. These cases also reveal the dynamic nature of policy failures moving from one to another in the public policy processes. The fourth section further discusses key arguments and implications drawn from the case studies, and the last section offers concluding thoughts and avenues for future research.

Understanding policy failure as the nexus of politics and bureaucratic failure

Thompson (1988) noted that policy failures are caused by *the problem of democratic dirty hands*, such as inconsistent political morality and persistent conflicts in the political sphere, and *the problem of many hands* related to the difficulty of identifying who is responsible for the collective outcomes. In a broad spectrum, there are two types of policy failures: politically-driven policy failures by dirty-handed politicians (i.e., political/politics failures) and administratively-driven policy failures by many-handed administrators (i.e., bureaucratic failures). The former political/politics failures are associated with ambiguous and contradictory goals, temporal inconsistency, logrolling, decision delays, and partisan conflicts from political polarization (Meier et al., 2019; Shepsle & Weingast, 1984; Weingast, 2005; Weingast et al., 1981). Carrigan (2018) shows that government agencies struggle due to conflicting goals and priorities posed to them, which lead to goal neglect or coordination failures.

In contrast, policy failures are often administratively driven by the lack of resources, expertise, integrity, or management skills for coordination/cooperation, as well as the bureaucratic silos, administrative delays, red tape, conflicts or collusion with interest groups, opposition from stakeholders, limited bureaucratic autonomy in policy implementation, and collective action problems inside bureaucracies (Compton & Meier, 2017; Goodsell, 2004; Kaufmann et al., 2018; Lee, 2019; Meier et al., 2019; Weingast, 2005). The lack of bureaucratic capacity triggers coping mechanisms (Meier et al., 2019), such as developing bureaucratic red tape (Kaufmann et al., 2018), creating administrative burden (Heinrich, 2018), seeking organizational solutions (Compton & Meier, 2017), and non-compliance through delaying decisions and failing to meet deadlines (Bertelli & Doherty, 2019). The difficulty in identifying responsible actors increases politicians' incentive to avoid blame and bureaucrats' incentive to shirk responsibility or abuse authority.¹

This section develops a typology that prefigures policy failures according to the degree of political incentives and

Table 1. Typology of policy failures driven by politics and bureaucracy

		Politics and political stake/incentive involved	
		Low (P_L)	High (P_H)
Bureaucratic capacity	Low (B_L)	(A) Ineffective decision-making Ineffective implementation Structural negligence	(B) Ineffective, delayed implementation of desired policy or action
	High (B_H)	(C) Unchecked bureaucracy, Bureaucratic shirking, escaping accountability	(D) Effective, prompt implementation of flawed policy or action

bureaucratic capacity. The underpinning of the typology is the Friedrich-Finer debate on accountability in democratic governance based on political control and bureaucratic capacity. For the two-by-two typology simplifying the nature of policy failures, several notations and assumptions are necessary. First, we assume the heterogeneity of agencies' capacity within the bureaucracy. There are two types of bureaucratic agencies: high-capacity agencies (B_H) and low-capacity agencies (B_L). Second, politics are involved when policy outcomes have a high political stake that affects electoral outcomes or satisfies political incentives to appeal to the electorate, such as increasing public spending. Politics involved in a specific policy are assumed to differ in two ways: high political incentives (P_H) and low political incentives (P_L). Third, the level of the bureaucratic capacity of a specific agency is rather sticky, although not fixed, in the short term. Fourth, the degree of the political incentives involved in a specific policy is volatile to salient political events such as elections and crises. A critical event and media attention can dramatically change politicians' views about administrative agencies; however, individual politicians' interests in a specific policy gradually decrease over time (e.g., Bertelli et al., 2015; Bertelli & Sinclair, 2015). The third and fourth assumptions are necessary to explain the dynamic changes in policy failures, as shown in Figure 3 in the Discussion section. Lastly, for a clearer understanding of politicians' and bureaucrats' utility functions in policymaking and implementation, we assume that politicians have electoral incentives to maximize votes that often lead to failing policies. Politicians are characterized as those who may have a good intention to advance the public interest but often seek pork for their constituencies, pursuing popularity for subsequent elections (Hood, 2002; Shepsle & Weingast, 1984; Weingast et al., 1981). On the other hand, bureaucracy has a weaker representative function and seeks to expand autonomy out of political controls.

Table 1 demonstrates four types of policy failure – (A) structural negligence or inaction (B_L, P_L); (B) ineffective implementation of desired policy/action (B_L, P_H); (C) unchecked bureaucracy or bureaucratic shirking (B_H, P_L);

and (D) prompt implementation of flawed policy/action (B_H, P_H). The present study discusses these types with two cases involving high-capacity agencies (B_H) and low-capacity agencies (B_L) while political incentives change over time. The (A) type of failure has been studied with the concept of non-decision making (Bachrach & Baratz, 1963), agenda denial (Cobb & Ross, 1997), or neglect in policy-making (De Vries, 2010). Scholars have studied underlying causes and consequences of policy inactions; for example, McConnell & 't Hart (2019) offered five typologies of policy inaction—calculated, ideological, imposed, reluctant, and inadvertent inaction—according to policy makers' motivation and availability of alternative action. Regardless of the type, the negligence or inaction forebodes policy failures, as it inhibits opportune action.

The first case concerning the Korea Coast Guard (KCG) corresponds to dynamic failures from (A) structural negligence to (B) bureaucratic failure due to ineffective implementation during and after the sinking of the ferry MV Sewol. A low bureaucratic capacity and lack of motivation to fulfill their function may be the direct cause of the failure, which will be the focus of the discussion of bureaucratic failure. Yet, it also reveals aspects of political failures before and after the accident, where the under-trained, ill-equipped agency had been left with little discretion over equivocal jurisdictions for decades (B_L, P_L)_{t-1}, and politicians stacked the deck against a less salient agency for political or electoral gains (B_L, P_H)_t.

The second case discusses the politics of preliminary feasibility studies (PFS) required for major public projects. The PFS waiver has been increasing over the past decades while government effectively provides a basis for pursuing those projects and promptly implements them once exempted. The politics of PFS exemption demonstrates policy failures originating from (D) implementing flawed policy (B_H, P_H)_t and shifts to (C) unchecked bureaucracy shirking and escaping accountability (B_H, P_L)_{t+1}. This case explores policy failures uniquely manifested in a highly capable bureaucracy, which shows policy failures driven by effective, prompt implementation of flawed decisions involved with a great deal

1 This is referred to as the identifiability error and evaluability error (Bertelli, 2021) or the paradox of shared responsibility (Bovens, 1998) in the network pluralism in multi-level governance (Papadopoulos, 2010). Bertelli (2021) articulates two types of identifiability errors—Type I (false positives), identifying wrong actors to be blamed; and Type II (false negatives), identifying responsible actors but little blamed.

of political interests and pork-barrel politics (Baqir, 2002; Shepsle & Weingast, 1984; Weingast et al., 1981). The details about these two cases are elaborated in the next section.

Exploring Cases

The Failure of the Korea Coast Guard (KCG)

Since the Korean War, the judicial police authority over maritime circumstances has been enforced by the Korea Coast Guard (KCG), whose title, affiliation, and authority have changed quite often (Son, 2018; Yoon, 2014). The KCG (then the National Maritime Police Agency) was separated from the National Police Agency and became independent in 1996. Over the 10 years between 2003 and 2012, the agency affiliated with the Ministry of Oceans and Fisheries (MOF, renamed several times) had evolved to a larger organization for increasing illegal fishing and territorial dispute with Japan over Dokdo (Yoon, 2014). However, compared to the U.S. Coast Guard (USCG) affiliated with the Department of Homeland Security, the enforcement and regulation authority of the KCG as maritime police has been severely limited (Lee et al., 2013). After the ferry MV Sewol accident in April 2014, the agency was terminated and merged into a lower-level organization, Maritime Security and Safety Headquarters.

The accident revealed the failure of emergency response by an agency due to a multitude of problems within the bureaucracy, including red tape; inefficient commanding and reporting systems (B.-S. Kim & Kim, 2014; Son, 2018); lack of administrative discretion, resources, and expertise (Meier, 2020; Meier et al., 2019); turf building or jurisdiction claiming (Maor, 2010); and lack of cooperation among agencies (Busuic, 2016). In particular, the KCG's inefficient response and failed policy for emergency preparedness were attributed to legal constraints, limited budget and staff, diffused and overlapped jurisdiction, disorganized reporting/commanding chains, iron triangle among organized interest groups or power elite, and organizational overload of the existing maritime administration with the expanding burden of coastal guarding service, among others (C.-Y. Jang, 2013; S. Jang et al., 2019; B.-S. Kim & Kim, 2014; Son, 2018). Some or all of these factors have limited the KCG's capacity to perform search and rescue missions at the site that requires immediate actions. With limited discretion, the KCG was not able to take any risk in their job on site but was devoted to reporting the situation to the higher authority in the centralized administrative system. The Commissioner of the KCG later claimed that "the most important job of ours is to report to a higher authority" when defending the organization's prioritizing reporting to the Blue House rather than rescuing the passengers. B.-S. Kim & Kim (2014) argued that bureaucrats would not order them to abandon ship, as they may end up facing criminal responsibility, in addition to political or ethical responsibility.

This failure that caused mass casualties had resulted in agency termination shortly after being accused of the poor response to the ferry MV Sewol accident by then-President Park and the ruling party. Nevertheless, the KCG's failure was due to underlying problems which originated from political and governance failure. Receiving little attention

from political principals and the media, the agency had been drifting from government to government without clear chains of command, administrative discretion, and organizational resources, demonstrating (A) structural negligence (B_L, P_L)_{t-1}. Due to low visibility, coastal accidents and marine police have always taken a back seat to public safety on the ground and land police (Seol, 2018). The administrative vacuum and mismatch between responsibility and authority had been neglected for several decades while focusing on external organizational growth and performative public administration. This allowed interest groups in the industry to capture regulatory agencies for decades. S. Jang et al. (2019) illuminated the power elite networks among government departments and quasi-government, nonprofit, and for-profit organizations involved in the coastal security or marine transport industry.

Faced with the unprecedented accident, however, it was manifested as a bureaucratic failure characterized by (B) ineffective, delayed implementation of the desired policy/action. The temporary media salience and sentiment against an agency, along with increasing political stake (P_H), provided politicians with a good opportunity to shift blame and turn it into a scapegoat (Bertelli & Sinclair, 2015; Hood, 2002). Agency termination was not an irrational, if impetuous, move from politicians, as mishandling of the major accident could be damaging to their political approval rates and subsequent elections. In addition, it allowed them to claim credits for prompt political control over an incompetent government organization, i.e., the KCG. The termination of the KCG and its absorption into a low-ranked organization fits well with blame-shifting toward a bureaucratic agency when political stakes are high and the negative media attention is on the rise (Bertelli & Sinclair, 2015; Fiorina, 1986; Hood, 2002; S. Park, 2013).

However, the termination raised concerns and questions about procedural legitimacy from politicians, bureaucrats, and academic communities. At a National Assembly hearing, an opposition party criticized it as a rough-and-ready measure or a political surprise show without having any discussions in a state council meeting. Concerns about organizational effectiveness were also raised, as structural changes often have disruptive effects on organizational outcomes (Andrews & Boyne, 2012; Lee et al., 2013; S. Park, 2013). The KCG implements various maritime policies, such as protecting ocean sovereignty, preserving the blue belt, preventing marine accidents, and regulating illegal fishing entry and drug smugglings under the rapidly changing marine circumstances, such as the Exclusive Economic Zone and fishery agreements (Lee et al., 2013). These organizational functions related to safety and security cannot be terminated but only transferred to another organization with fewer resources and authority. After four years, the agency was reinstated during the President Moon administration catching up with a growing trend of budgets and personnel (Figure 1). Nevertheless, several indicators indicated that this "termination" drives down organizational performance (Figure 2).

The Politics of Preliminary Feasibility Study (PFS)

The idea of the preliminary feasibility study (PFS) was first introduced in 1999 after the financial crisis (1997-98) as an effort to reduce inefficiencies in public spending. It was mandated for projects costing more than ₩50 billion (≈ \$45 million) in total and ₩30 billion (≈ \$27 million) from the general budget. PFS has played a significant role in policy decisions and budget processes as an “ex-ante appraisal of large-scale infrastructure investment projects in Korea” (K.-S. Kim & Yu, 2007, p. 138). It is referred to as “preliminary,” as PFS is a “provisional” evaluation that “precedes” a more detailed feasibility study (H. Park et al., 2007, p. 125). PFS has been incorporated in the budget processes since 2006; the number of projects evaluated by PFS has increased in various areas, such as roads, railways, airports, seaports, culture, and tourism.

PFS has multiple criteria other than economic values, such as effectiveness, acceptability, urgency, sustainability, political feasibility, equity between the rich and poor, present and future generations, central-local or urban-rural development, and different demographic groups.² The feasibility analyses include three components, i.e., economic feasibility analysis (e.g., B/C ratio), policy or political feasibility analysis, and balanced regional development analysis. Distinct from economic feasibility that concerns the net benefit of the proposed project, political feasibility refers to “the probability that it will be sufficiently acceptable to the various secondary decisionmakers, executors, interest groups, and public whose participation or acquiescence is needed” (Dror, 2017, p. 35).

Still, several projects are exempted from PFS by law, such as government complexes, correction facilities, educational buildings, cultural assets restoration, national security projects, inter-Korean cooperation, and projects associated with country-level pacts or treaties, emergency aid and recovery efforts, and safety and sanitation. Previous administrations under President Lee (2008-2013) and President Park (2014-2017) exempted 88 and 85 projects that amounted to \$55 billion and \$20 billion, respectively (Citizens’ Coalition for Economic Justice, n.d.). The amount of PFS-exempted public projects reached \$80 billion as of October 2020 in the third year of the President Moon administration (2017-2022) (Citizens’ Coalition for Economic Justice, n.d.), which is a sharp increase even allowing for spending demands generated from the COVID-19 pandemic. Most of the exemptions were on construction and engineering projects, such as Saemankum international airport, Southern inland railroad, Daejeon tram, and Gadeokdo new airport, all of which were not likely to pass PFS.

The focus of PFS has been changing from assisting decision makers and public administrators by assessing the project in many different ways to determining whether to pur-

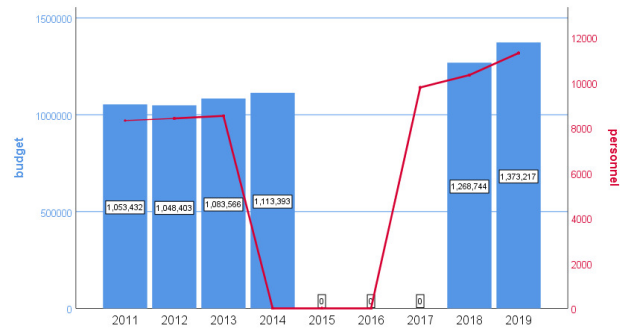


Figure 1. Total budget and personnel of the KCG by year, 2011–2019

Source: Ministry of Economy and Finance <https://www.openfiscaldata.go.kr/>; Ministry of Personnel Management <http://www.mpm.go.kr/>

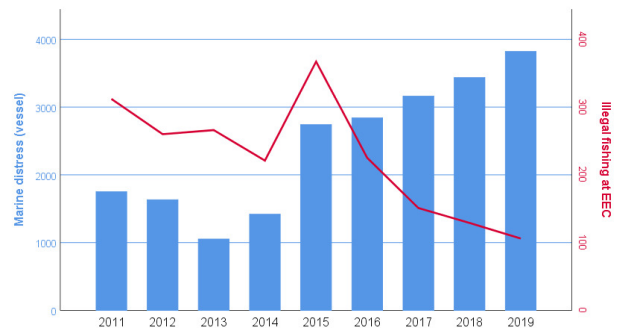


Figure 2. Number of marine distress (vessels) and illegal fishing at EEC by year, 2011–2019

Source: Korea Coast Guard <http://www.kcg.go.kr/>; <https://www.index.go.kr/>

sue the project or not, which creates political incentives to circumvent or override PFS for plausible reasons. Indeed, PFS has raised concerns about distributional impacts on different groups. Appraisers tend to be over-optimistic about the project and underestimate long-term, non-quantifiable values (K.-S. Kim & Yu, 2007; Ko, 2007). Regional and local governments have raised complaints that their projects were subject to reverse discrimination against metropolitan projects, which led to a wider gap between metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas. Despite the need for balanced development and reinvigorating regional/local economy, regional/local projects are less likely to pass PFS due to low demands and populations. The deputy Prime Minister of Economic Affairs claimed that the PFS exemption facilitates regional/local economy and development by increasing SOC and R&D investment that meets their demands. A survey showed that public opinion diverges greatly by respondents’ regions, political preference, and age regarding the PFS ex-

² A PFS evaluation team is associated with the Korea Development Institute (KDI), universities, and private firms. Based on the Analytic Hierarchy Process (AHP), each analysis’s qualitative and quantitative assessment results are synthesized to provide broad suggestions for policymakers (K.-S. Kim & Yu, 2007; H. Park et al., 2007).

emption based on balanced development (Realmeter.net).

Nevertheless, extending the scope of the exemptions has been at the center of debate and criticism in that politicians themselves bend the rules and set undesirable precedents. Above all, PFS exemptions one year prior to a general election were criticized as pork-barrel spending and logrolling. Many PFS-exempted projects in previous administrations have ended in outright failure, causing mountains of waste, corruption, and moral hazard, as described in the (C) type of policy failure. The government led by President Moon was accused of applying double standards, as it has been particularly critical of previous governments overriding PFS in several mega-projects, for example, the four-river refurbishment and the Gyeongin Ara Waterway driven by President Lee (2008-2013). Despite the criticism and condemnation,³ the government exempted many projects from PFS instead of addressing the concerns and considering alternative ways to accommodate the needs for prompt review.

In addition to the politics, the PFS-exempted projects have been effectively implemented by capable government agencies with resources and incentives to pursue the projects.⁴ As political interests wane over time, the project with established rights and interests becomes a tool of bureaucratic rent-seeking. Bureaucrats in league with quasi-government organizations, interest groups, and stakeholders, such as local developers, suppliers, construction contractors, and subcontractors, find it easy to pursue their interests and escape accountability from political principles. Many of the exempted projects in the government budget plan have flouted the PFS guidelines, such as allocating budgets before evaluating project plans, being overlapped with local government projects, and allocating budgets larger than the amount drawn from the review. The recent scandal surrounding the speculative investment in real estate by the Korea Land & Housing Cooperation (LH) demonstrates a corollary originating from failing to hold agents accountable, as discussed in the traditional principal-agent theory.

Discussion

This section recapitulates several points that add validity to theoretical arguments about the causes and consequences of policy failures. First, policy failures are resulting outcomes of malfunctioning in both political and bureaucratic institutions, associated with high or low political incentives and bureaucratic capacity. Politics and administration are inextricably intertwined in policy failures regardless of their scope and degree. Politicians and bureaucrats have a symbiotic relationship in the political and administrative systems (Miller & Whitford, 2016), while politics and bureaucratic capacity affect policy processes

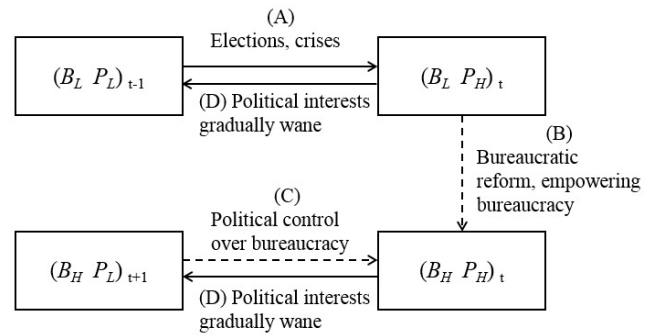


Figure 3. The vicious circles of policy failures

$(B_L P_H)_t$: Political rent-seeking, blame-shifting, scapegoating

$(B_H P_L)_{t+1}$: Bureaucratic rent-seeking, shirking, escaping accountability

Solid line: spontaneous or natural changes

Dotted line: deliberate efforts from politics and bureaucracy

differently. Thus, whether a policy failure is politically or administratively driven largely depends on the temporal and spatial scope of the discussion along with the policy cycles.

Second, the typology shows the multifaceted and dynamic nature of policy failures with different underlying reasons at different stages of policy processes. A specific policy failure is not fixed to a specific typology but varies depending on when and where we define a policy as a failure. Figure 3 shows the politics-administration dynamics in policy failure shifting from structural negligence to ineffective implementation (e.g., the KCG case) or from implementing flawed policy to unchecked bureaucracy (e.g., the PFS case). Having an acute interest in a specific policy for an upcoming election or an emergency, politicians later blame a bureaucratic agency for delayed decisions and/or inefficient implementation. Politicians tend to do it to low-capacity agencies rather than high-capacity agencies that may have developed processes to shield themselves from political influence. Even when provided with performance information, politicians are most willing to engage in responsibility attribution to bureaucrats for low performance (Nielsen & Moynihan, 2016). In fact, oftentimes, politicians are not interested in an agency's actual performance nor using it as "an opportunity for reflection and learning" for bureaucracy (Busuic & Lodge, 2016, p. 252).

After a critical situation is settled, politicians' attention to a specific policy naturally and gradually wanes over time (Figure 3, Link D). Therefore, a low-capacity agency is trapped in a vicious circle in which their low capacity leads to failure to respond and being blamed and ends up with little resources, discretion, and motivation. The first row of Figure 3 depicts the circle (Links A-D). The termination of the KCG was consistent with the blame-shifting argument

³ Policy experts, professors, policy activists, and lawyers in research institutes, universities, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (e.g., Citizens' Coalition for Economic Justice, Minbyun-Lawyers for a Democratic Society, Korea Environmental Conference, Green Transport Movement, and Fiscal Reform Institute) have asserted that grounds for exempting PFS for construction and infrastructure projects were not convincing given all the criteria with different weights.

⁴ In most cases, the concerned departments were the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transport, Ministry of Oceans and Fisheries, Ministry of Science and ICT, and Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, among others.

that political actors utilize bureaucracy to avoid blame against the political regime (Bertelli et al., 2015; Fiorina, 1986). As the KCG had a weak reputation and the media was hostile, the regime could easily pick the target and use termination as an act of political control (Bertelli et al., 2015; S. Park, 2013). Thus, the KCG has experienced the failing circle after being blamed and terminated to divert criticism against the regime and political failures in dealing with the situation and left with scant attention to their organizational capacity. This scapegoating is not new in democratic governance.⁵ In the contemporary institutional design separating and sharing power, politicians are incentivized to use public administration “as a scapegoat for systemic problems that they either cannot understand or refuse to confront responsibly.” (Wamsley, 1996, p. 354). This may occur more frequently in a centralized administrative system like South Korea (S. Park & Fowler, 2021), where bureaucrats are less likely to take risks and are “more concerned with reactions from higher-ups and taking more time to secure managerial approval” (Meier et al., 2019, p. 19). However, it has a lingering negative effect on bureaucratic capacity as it is difficult for low-capacity agencies to improve their organizational skills, culture, and performance after being punished. The termination of the KCG had a chilling effect on the replacing organization, causing demoralization and an administrative vacuum in safety and security management, which again weakens bureaucratic capacity and professionalism.

This leads to the third point that administrative reform rebuilding bureaucracy and delegating and empowering bureaucratic agencies would help cut off the vicious circle (Link B). Gailmard & Patty (2007, p. 874) argued that bureaucratic expertise is “endogenous, costly, and relationship specific,” and bureaucrats develop their policy expertise when properly incentivized. Advocating the role of bureaucracy “as part of a system of checks and balances,” Friedrich (1940) claimed that political principals need to relax control and expand bureaucratic autonomy into developing professionalism, which will be an internal and external control mechanism for both bureaucrats and politicians (Miller & Whitford, 2016, p. 21), emphasizing the mechanism depicted in Link B. Policy-motivated bureaucrats (i.e., zealots) are less likely to diverge from their political principals’ preference (Gailmard & Patty, 2007), and bureaucrats are more responsive to political control and priorities than the literature suggests (Bertelli & Doherty, 2019).

At the same time, it calls for an effort to monitor, control,

and reform the government relationship with various clientele in the industry (Link C). In the coastal security or marine transport industry, the government (i.e., KCG, MOF) depends on arm’s length agencies (e.g., Korea Maritime Transportation Safety Authority, Busan Port Authority, Incheon Port Authority) and maintains a close relationship with private organizations (e.g., Korean Register of Shipping [KR], Korea Maritime Rescue & Salvage Association [MRSA], Korea Shipping Association [KSA]). These cooperative clientele groups provide political and administrative support as well as create an iron triangle called *Kwanfia* (Bureau + mafia) or *Haefia* (Sea + mafia) that significantly undermines responsiveness to the public (S. Jang et al., 2019; B.-S. Kim & Kim, 2014; Meier, 2020; Meier et al., 2019; S. Park & Kim, 2014).⁶ This iron triangle among these organizations has lasted for decades based on patronage networks and collusion among politicians, bureaucrats, quasi-government agencies (i.e., quangos), and private organizations (S. Jang et al., 2019; B.-S. Kim & Kim, 2014).⁷ Meanwhile, the close relationship of bureaucracies with other organizations may be developed as a bureaucratic solution to perform their jobs with limited resources (Compton & Meier, 2017).

Fourth, the increase in PFS exemption illustrates pork barrel politics by legislators as well as bureaucrats’ rent-seeking behaviors. The case of PFS exemption reveals the failures of expansionist fiscal policies when both political stakes on the policies and bureaucratic capacities to implement them are high (B_H, P_H).⁸ Of course, PFS is not a golden rule in determining public spending and decision-making within a democratic government. The PFS itself is an outcome of ministerial bargaining, as described by public choice theorists,⁸ between the Ministry of Economy and Finance (then Ministry of Planning and Budget) and local government or other ministries, such as the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, and Transport (then Ministry of Construction and Transportation) (H. Park et al., 2007, p. 126). However, if properly run, PFS is a meaningful and powerful tool to mitigate information asymmetry and streamline budgetary decisions. It could function as a safeguard or an austerity measure to ensure that tax money is spent for feasible projects, given that citizens do not select or sanction bureaucrats directly.

As public policies/programs lacking economic and political feasibility are doomed to fail, major public projects that require government budgets over several years or decades need to be carefully reviewed and considered in a long-term

5 In the U.S., there was an extensive search for scapegoats after NASA’s failed Challenger launch in 1984 (Romzek & Dubnick, 1987). Similarly, the Korean Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (KCDC), with limited authority and resources, was blamed and penalized after the outbreak of MERS (Middle East Respiratory Syndrome) in 2015. The KCDC was caught in the cycle of low capacity, low performance, punishment, low motivation, high turnover, and low bureaucratic capacity (S. Park & Fowler, 2021).

6 For example, according to the Board of Audit and Inspection (2014) report, ship/vessel inspection and safety verification of the MV Sewol were poorly performed by the KR and KSA, respectively (B.-S. Kim & Kim, 2014).

7 Patronage networks constructed between government and quasi-government agencies have been criticized as a cause of moral hazard and corruption, where quango executives are selected by the politics of appointment among the president, the government, and the concerned quango (S. Park & Kim, 2014).

8 Policies can be understood as an outcome of bureaucratic politics and competitions among agencies over resources, autonomy, turf, budget, information, and organizations (Buchanan & Tullock, 1962; Dunleavy, 1991; Niskanen, 1975).

perspective. Yet, politicians tend to have a short horizon and spend budgets more than optimal for electoral gains, and are more susceptible to moral hazards than bureaucrats (Miller & Whitford, 2016). As a result, budgets as a common pool resource (CPR) are vulnerable to exploitation by interested actors, which compromises the long-term sustainability of the resource (Baqir, 2002; Tang et al., 2014; Von Hagen, 2006). Baqir (2002) recognizes a CPR problem as a classical problem in which an individual legislator sponsoring a spending bill underscores benefits but fails to consider its total cost. Thus, public programs, where benefits are concentrated on electoral districts but costs are dispersed across the country, often result in spending higher than an economically optimal level (Shepsle & Weingast, 1984; Weingast et al., 1981).

Fifth, another important feature of Figure 3 is that maintaining policy control over policies matters when capable bureaucratic agencies implement them. Flawed political decisions loop back to rent-seeking behaviors of bureaucrats and employees in quasi-government organizations. The PFS case shows that bureaucratic failures may be exacerbated by a competent bureaucracy with bureaucrats pursuing their interests rather than being responsive to the intended policy goals, as political attention to a specific policy decrease over time $(B_H, P_L)_{t+1}$. The risk of bureaucratic rent-seeking and bureaucracy escaping accountability is described in the second row (Links C-D). This is in line with Finer (1941, p. 350) asserting that “While professional standards, duty to the public, and pursuit of technological efficiency are factors in sound administrative operation, they are but ingredients, and not continuously motivating factors, of sound policy, and they require public and political control and direction.”

With the advantage of information and experience, competent bureaucratic agencies may easily step aside from democratic control. Carpenter (2002) argued that a bureaucratic agency with a higher organizational capacity seeks to obtain independence from politicians. Bureaucrats often use performance information as an excuse or a justification to legitimize their decisions and actions (Thompson, 1988) or as a symbolic gesture or a rite of passage to achieve their organizational or individual goals (Ko, 2007). Thus, unchecked bureaucratic actions can cost democratic value, especially in a new democracy with a strong executive branch (Bertelli & Busuioc, 2020). Political and democratic control over bureaucracy constitutes the essence of administrative reforms (McCubbins et al., 1987), as illustrated in Link C. Yet, political principals often lack the incentive and capacity to fully monitor their agents’ behavior, leaving them to collude to exchange patronage and other benefits. Congressional oversight has its cost and creates the tradeoff between administrative delay and moral hazard (Lee, 2019).

Conclusion

This study explores two cases demonstrating policy failures as the nexus of politics and bureaucratic failures. In doing so, this study advances the dialogue regarding political and bureaucratic responsibility in a democratic context with a varying degree of bureaucratic capacity. This study shows that the variations in bureaucratic capacity need to be considered when empowering or controlling agencies to enhance political and bureaucratic accountability. The level of bureaucratic expertise significantly varies across agencies and organizations, and even a competent bureaucracy cannot address all the diversified and specialized policy issues. It poses a tradeoff for politicians giving up rent-seeking when empowering bureaucracy and avoiding costs associated with policy failures and bureaucratic shirking when controlling bureaucracy. Sometimes it is necessary to prioritize political feasibility determined by the interactions of institutions, such as Congress and the President, over economic feasibility (Bertelli & Doherty, 2019).

This article provides a rationale for future studies of policy failures that link to political and bureaucratic failures at different stages of policy processes. Understanding different types of policy failures highlights the myth of the politics-administration dichotomy and bureaucratic neutrality. Despite the advantages of strategic neutrality (Huber, 2007),⁹ achieving neutral competence may be unlikely and undesirable given the incentives of bureaucrats and political principals (Gailmard & Patty, 2007). Thus, scholars have stressed bureaucrats’ active responsibility or administrative loyalty (Bovens, 1996, p. 1998) or professional and political responsibility (Romzek & Dubnick, 1987) in resolving the tradeoffs. Bureaucrats and policy workers can complement and strengthen responsibility with their expertise and reputation when given a proper level of discretion and resources, which may differ across governments in different contexts (Bertelli, 2021; Brugué & Gallego, 2003; Miller & Whitford, 2016). Democratizing public administration is not all about control but about allowing it to address the tradeoff and reorient democracy (Bertelli, 2021).

In a broader sense, the typology is based on the politics-administration relationships embedded in policy processes, which helps us look at the two sides of the policy failure coin. The conceptual framework focused on the degrees of political incentives and bureaucratic capacity expands its application scope to the dynamics of public policy cycles, from non-decisionmaking, agenda-setting, policy implementation to policy evaluation, as well as the problems of institutional design in democratic governance. The typology could guide description and produce propositions or hypotheses that can be empirically tested using case studies, observational/archival data, and experimental data. Policy actions by individual policymakers and public administrators are embedded in various contexts characterized as governance structures and administrative history. This

⁹ Huber (2007, p. 14) argues that bureaucrats’ strategic neutrality allows “practicing uniform implementation with regard to factors outside the direct control of centralized bureaucratic superiors while nonetheless allowing agency-wide decisions to vary according to centralized directives.”

study explores policy failure cases in South Korea whose structural design is not as fragmented as that in the U.S. while multiple principal problems always exist and become more severe as political polarization increases (Meier et al., 2019; S. Park & Fowler, 2021).

However, the conclusions and potential policy implications of this study are not necessarily applicable to other contexts, especially where not fully democratized. The two cases offer a glimpse into policy failures in various phases but do not cover comprehensive types of policies. An obvious question about the typology concerns the role of bureaucratic ethics and public service motivation and how

these increase internal checks and improve bureaucrats' accountability. This study also largely omits the discussions about citizens and policy entrepreneurs engaged in policy decisions. The roles played by those outside the government are essential to prevent political and bureaucratic moral hazards.

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