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Introduction

Studying Successful Public Policy in the Nordic Countries

*Caroline de la Porte, Guðný Björk Eydal, Jaakko Kauko, Daniel Nohrstedt,
Paul 't Hart and Bent Sofus Tranøy*

Policy Successes in a Celebrated Region

There is a generalized narrative of ‘high performance’ regarding growth, combined with ‘good government’ around public policy and public administration associated with Nordic countries. There is, furthermore, international scholarly acknowledgement of the advantages of the ‘Nordic’ or ‘Scandinavian’ Model of welfare states and industrial relations in terms of fostering competitiveness along with equality (see for instance, Brezis et al., 2018). The Nordic region is the region in the world with the highest level of generalized trust and trust in government (Holmberg and Rothstein 2020). It has, furthermore, been iconized by international media and think-tanks for high-profile policy successes such as Nordic kindergartens and schools, family policies and climate change initiatives.

The celebration of governance and public policy in the Nordic region emanates in no small measure from international institutions, such as the OECD, highlighting policies such as social investment, enabling parents to combine work and family life (Kvist 2015), and the European Union, underscoring the value of the flexicurity model for labour-market policy (Viebrock and Clasen 2009). Moreover, much of the praise is rooted in high-level performance statistics and bird’s eye perspectives on Nordic political institutions, policy styles and administrative traditions (Castles and Obinger 2008; Painter and Peters 2010). One influential scholar has used the phrase ‘getting to Denmark’ to signal a widely shared view among development scholars of Denmark as a paragon of successful statehood and liberal democracy (Fukuyama 2011). Nordic countries have also been marked out as the world’s happiest nations, by CNN, in terms of governance and economic growth, as ‘the next supermodel’ (by *The Economist*, in February 2013), and in terms of welfare states that are both generous and efficient (again by *The Economist*, in a June 2021 special report). Biden’s current reform plans for the US—to give a boost to those most in need, to support families, and to support job creation—are inspired by the gist of the Nordic welfare capitalisms: high labour-market participation, supported by family policies, as well as support for those

most in need. International scholars, especially from the US, have been fascinated by the capability of the Nordic countries to be fully integrated in the global political economy while maintaining high levels of social cohesion, growth and well-being (Cox 2004; Martin 2013). Most recently, and with the exception of Sweden, Nordic countries lived up to their reputations by performing well in response to both the public health and socio-economic threats posed by the Covid-19 pandemic (Gordon et al. 2021; Mishra et al. 2021).

Scholars from within the region have been more guarded and have had a keener eye for nation-specific historical trajectories and institutional arrangements (Simola et al. 2017) and cross-country differences and variations in performance over time in the welfare area (Kautto et al. 1990; Stephens 1996). There has been attention to discerning Nordic similarities as well as differences in policy domains such as housing and urban development (Nordic Council of Ministers 2005, Tranøy et al. 2019), gender equalizing child-centred family policy (Eydal et al. 2018), education (Dovemark et al. 2018), and environmental policy. In the Nordics, many decisions are taken as closely as possible to citizens, following the subsidiarity principle. Local authorities not only implement policy decided at national level, but have decision-making authority in a range of areas, and also collect taxes locally. Thus, even though Nordic countries are relatively small, their governance structures are highly decentralized, especially in the welfare-state area.

Moreover, while the remarkable consistency and resilience of their equality-enhancing universalistic social policies, activating labour-market policies across three decades of economic turbulence have been widely noted and lauded (Barth et al. 2014; Dølvik et al. 2015; Kvist and Greve 2011), the Nordic polities were unable to dodge the tidal waves of political volatility, populism, polarization and radicalization that have rolled across Europe in the past two decades (Fladmoe 2012; Jungar and Jupskås 2014).

Likewise, despite their consistently high scores on good government, happiness, better life and a range of other global indexes, the Nordic countries have not been spared their share of wicked problems such as environmental degradation, disengaged youths, violent gangs, people smuggling, hate crimes, home-grown terrorist attacks and transboundary conundrums such as the global financial crisis of 2008–2009 (which hit Iceland particularly hard). In these policy domains and in response to these common challenges, the evidence of a ‘Nordic model’ in the way the various Nordic governments operate is more mixed (e.g. Dølvik et al. 2015; Kotajoki 2018; Laegreid and Rykkja 2018; Ólafsson et al. 2019; Stie and Trondal 2020).

The contours of the Nordic model have remained intact, even if there are changes at the margin (Arnholtz and Andersen 2018; Dølvik et al. 2018; Kvist and Greve 2011;). Since the 1990s the traditional Scandinavian corporatist model, characterized by consensual democratic governance and a strong and active presence of interest groups, especially social partners, in policy formulation and

implementation, has been subject to growing pressure. There has been a gradual shift in the Scandinavian policy-making style in the direction of more informal interaction between the state and organized interests, lobbying and advocacy, and the growing importance of new policy actors such as policy professionals, think tanks, and other producers of policy ideas (e.g. [Christiansen and Rommetvedt 2002](#); [Christiansen et al. 2010](#); [Holli and Turkka 2021](#); [Lindvall and Sabring 2005](#); [Svallfors 2016](#)). Policy networks and network governance in and of these more crowded and contested policy arenas have become a more widely probed route to address complex policy challenges.

Notwithstanding these changes, students of successful public policymaking will continue to examine what goes on in Northern Europe ([Scott 2014](#); [Sörensen and Torfing 2019](#); [Øvald et al. 2019](#)). Our aim is to contribute to the growing literature on policy successes, providing a focus on the Nordic countries ([Compton and 't Hart 2019](#); [de la Porte et al. forthcoming](#); [Luetjens et al. 2019](#); [McConnell 2010, 2017](#)). We consider it important to continue to examine and understand the genesis of governments' positive accomplishments at a time when public disenchantment with government, politics and democracy is spreading like wildfire. Contributing to this emerging wave of 'positive' public governance scholarship ([Douglas et al. 2021](#)), the aims of this book are to see, describe, acknowledge, and promote learning from past and present instances of highly effective and highly valued public policymaking in the five Nordic countries. This book is envisaged as a companion volume to the agenda-setting *Great Policy Successes* ([Compton and 't Hart 2019](#)) and to concurrent volumes on policy successes in Australia and New Zealand ([Luetjens et al. 2019](#)) and Canada ([Lindquist et al. 2022](#)).

Identifying and Understanding Policy Successes

Through public policies, governments have enormous potential to shape the lives of their citizens. Actions taken at any given time can affect both present conditions and future trajectories. Much is at stake when new public policies are forged or when established ones are reformed, and it behoves governments to learn from past experiences and avoid earlier errors as well as emulate past successes.

To a certain extent, the academic policy literature has lagged behind these developments. In the 1970s scholars produced classic accounts of public policy, now ensconced in the canon of academic research worldwide and academic curricula in universities everywhere, but which focussed attention on policy failures rather than successes. Among the best-known works from this foundational set of policy studies in the US, for example, are Pressman and Wildavsky's 1973 classic *Implementation* and Peter Hall's *Great Planning Disasters*, published in 1980, which showcased and explored public-policy failures. These studies showed that although having seized a much more prominent role in public life following World

War II, Western governments had internal complexities which combined with the vagaries of democratic political decision to often thwart their ambitions.

Somewhat unintentionally, generations of public-policy and public-administration students were steeped in such pessimistic diagnoses from these and waves of similar studies which followed them (Bovens and 't Hart 1996; Butler et al. 1994; Gray and 't Hart 1998) and in the 2010s (Allern and Pollack 2012; Crewe and King 2013; Light 2014; Opperman and Spencer 2016; Schuck 2014). Although this did provide a firm analytical grounding of the institutional, behavioural, political and media dynamics contributing to the occurrence, framing and escalation of public-policy failure, it largely ignored or downplayed policy success.

This discourse has been quite influential. Day in, day out, media reports and social media discussions about alleged government mistakes continue to exacerbate this negative frame, with significant implications for public perceptions and appreciation of government institutions. Though significant, however, the story of endemic government failure ignores the fact that in the Nordic countries—perhaps even more frequently and consistently than in other parts of the world—public projects, programmes and services have often performed well, sometimes exceptionally well, and sometimes for decades on end (see Bovens et al. 2001; Goderis 2015; Roberts 2018), generating as well as benefitting from high levels of generalized public trust (Rothstein and Oslaner 2005; Rothstein 2013).

And yet, to date most academic students of public policy have had little to say about 'how the sausages are made' when public policy is done well. The net impact of the lack of focus on this 'up-side' of government is that the current generation of students and young scholars in public policy and governance cannot properly 'see' and recall, let alone recognize and explain successful policies and programmes in their own countries.

What our field needs is a more balanced focus on both the 'light' and the 'dark' sides of the performance of our political and public-sector institutions (Compton et al. 2021). This book is designed to help achieve this. It aims to help reset agendas for teaching, research and dialogue on public policy and governance both within and beyond the five countries of the Nordic region by systematically examining outstanding cases of policy success, providing a foil to those who focus only upon errors and mistakes. It offers a series of close-up, in-depth case-study accounts of the genesis and evolution of stand-out public-policy achievements, across a range of jurisdictions, sectors, issues and time periods. Through these case analyses, we hope to inspire a generation of teachers and researchers in policy analysis.

In this volume, we will adopt as our working definition that a policy can be regarded as a success to the extent that it: (a) demonstrably achieves highly valued social outcomes; (b) a broad base of public and political support for these achievements and the processes involved in their design and delivery; (c) manages to sustain this equilibrium of high performance and strong legitimacy for a

considerable period of time even in the face of changing circumstances (Compton and 't Hart 2019; Lindquist et al. 2022; Luetjens et al. 2019).

Of course, like 'failure', success is not a matter of indisputable fact. Helicopter (e.g. 'net benefits to society') and granular ('inequitable distribution of costs and benefits to different groups in society') vantage points may lead to stark differences in assessment and interpretation of policies and programmes (McConnell 2010). We can monetize or otherwise standardize costs and benefits of policy processes and outcomes, and we can set time frames and construct comparators across time and space to document our assessments. But there are also the lived realities and situated perceptions ('where you stand depends on where you sit') of different actors and stakeholders to be taken into account.

Labelling a policy or an agency as successful depends on which stakeholders are involved, the positions they take, and the political environment. Public perceptions, political support, programme legitimacy and institutional reputations all come into play in shaping whether a new government initiative or entity is considered successful or not. As McConnell et al. (2020) remind us, case studies of policy outcomes should go beyond ascertaining whether a particular programme is successful from the point of view of the government that undertook it; they should also probe the extent to which key actors within and outside government have been successful in shaping the programme and reaping its benefits. In that sense, all policies and programmes harbour particular configurations of success and failure depending on which and whose vantage points one uses in assessment. Questions thus abound for each case-study author. For example:

- Successful in what regard, for whom, at which point in time, relative to what benchmark?
- Successful in actually 'doing better' to achieve public purposes, or primarily in making the public 'feel better' through more effective framing and dramaturgy?
- How do luck (context, zeitgeist, chance events, crises) or skill (political and public-service craftsmanship in design, timing, execution, political management, capacity-building and public relations) each play their part, and how do they affect one another?

In structuring the case-study narratives and analyses, we provide case authors with a framework adapted from Compton and 't Hart (2019) and Luetjens et al. (2019) that requires them to attend to a number of factors and employ certain analytical perspectives in designing and reporting their case studies (see Table 1.1). Building on Bovens and 't Hart (1996) and McConnell (2010), two core assumptions underpin it:

Table 1.1 Dimensions of policy success: A map for case assessment

Programmatic success: Purposeful and valued action	Process success: Thoughtful and effective policy-making practices	Political success: Many winners, firm support and reputational benefits
<p>A well-developed <i>public value proposition</i> and <i>theory of change</i> underpin the policy</p> <p><i>Achievement</i> of (or, considerable momentum towards) the policy's intended and/or of other <i>beneficial social outcomes</i></p> <p>The pleasure and pain resulting from the policy are <i>distributed fairly</i> across the field of institutional and community stakeholders</p>	<p>The design process ensures carefully considered <i>choice of policy instruments appropriate to context</i> and in a manner that is perceived to be correct and fair</p> <p>The policy-making process offers reasonable opportunities for <i>different stakeholders to exercise influence</i> and <i>different forms of expertise</i> to be heard, as well as for <i>innovative practices and solutions</i> to be attempted before key policy choices are made</p> <p>The policy-making process results in <i>adequate levels of funding, realistic timelines and administrative capacity</i></p> <p>The delivery process effectively and adaptively deploys (mix of) policy instrument(s) to <i>achieve intended outcomes with acceptable costs</i>, and with limited unintended negative consequences</p>	<p>A wide array of stakeholders feel they have been able to advance their interests through the process and/or outcomes of the policy</p> <p>The policy enjoys relatively high levels of social, political and administrative support</p> <p>Being associated with the policy <i>enhances the reputations</i> of the actors driving it (both inside and outside government).</p>
<p>Success over time: Consolidation and endurance</p> <p><i>High levels of programmatic, process and political efficacy are maintained over time</i></p> <p>Stable or growing <i>strength of social, political and administrative coalitions favoring continuation</i> of the policy over time</p> <p>Emerging narratives about the policy's success <i>confer legitimacy on the broader political system</i></p>		

Source: authors, building upon [Compton and 't Hart \(2019\)](#)

First, it presupposes that balanced policy evaluation requires a multi-dimensional, multi-perspectivist, multi-criteria approach to assessment. Second, and inspired by Sabatier's (1988) now classic Advocacy Coalition Framework, it presumes that the success or failure of a public-policy

programme or project cannot be properly assessed unless one looks at its evolution and impact across a decade or more from its inception.

Aims and Design of This Volume

This book is designed first and foremost as a pedagogic and agenda-setting endeavour. The intent is for it to produce a range of up-close case studies of successful public policies and programmes in the Nordic region. The brief to case-study authors was threefold:

- (1) to use the categories of programmatic, process, political and endurance assessment (consolidated in Table 1.1) to ascertain that success was achieved, and in doing so demonstrate the ability of the PPPE framework to produce transparent and balanced assessment of the nature, degree and continuity of policy successes;
- (2) to provide thick-description policy narratives of the context, actors, processes and evolution of the case under study, so that readers get a firm grip on the drivers, enablers and constraints at work (taking on board the influences of both structures and agents);
- (3) to purposefully ‘hold their fire’ on injecting theory-driven explanations for the course and outcomes of the policies, so that researchers, teachers and students can probe the ‘goodness of fit’ of different explanatory constructs they may wish to apply—whether they be general governance paradigms (Torfing et al. 2020) and models of the policy process (see Cairney 2019), or middle-range theories about, for example, policy entrepreneurship (Petridou and Mintrom 2020), policy design (Howlett and Mukherjee 2020), network management (Klijn and Koppenjan 2016), policy feedback (Daugbjerg and Kay 2020), interest groups (Flöthe 2019), advocacy coalitions (Weible and Ingold 2018), bureaucratic politics (‘t Hart and Wille 2012), co-design (Ansell and Torfing 2021), co-production (Alford 2014), or policy implementation (Nilsen 2015).

This volume therefore primarily contains a set of stand-alone cases that are both teachable and may be used as empirical material by policy researchers. In methodological jargon, the cases have been purposefully selected to all congregate on similar scores on the dependent variable (degree of policy success)—not a strategy anyone bent on conducting comparative-explanatory work would prefer to apply. The reason for this is that unlike Bovens et al. (2001), this volume is not an exercise in cross-sectoral or cross-national comparative evaluation of policy successes (and failures). Our case-selection methods were therefore *not* geared to enable comparisons but to showcase known examples of successful public policy. That said, some

readers may wish to explore the potential for more targeted comparisons between clusters of similar cases captured in this book, for example Icelandic and Swedish parental leave schemes; Norwegian and Finnish gender quotas; Danish and Icelandic energy policies; or Swedish (budgets) and Norwegian (pensions) general interest reforms (cf. [Patashnik 2008](#)).

How did we proceed? Academic peers and other public-policy experts in the Nordic countries were consulted to identify potential cases, generate long lists geared to picking policies which at face value (in the opinion of the experts we consulted) seemed to clearly ‘make the cut’ in terms of the four main success criteria specified in [Table 1.1](#). Furthermore, we sought to ensure a broad spread of cases from different policy domains. Finally, we selected cases for which we were able to find subject-matter experts who were willing and able to undertake the case-study work using the PPPE framework.

In all, we believe we have a salient and rich mix of examples of successful public policy in the Nordic countries. Each in their own right offers powerful empirical stories about governments getting things right most of the time, and the authors will analyse how this happened. As such, each case study presents an instance of actors, institutions and processes of public policymaking coalescing to positive effect that can be dissected and debated in classrooms.

Degrees of Success

[Table 1.2](#) provides a quick overview of the success patterns across the 23 cases included in the book. First of all, it shows how in applying the framework, ‘shades of grey’ turn up in the assessment of the cases across the four main criteria, and how process success is the most elusive of the four. It also shows how some cases started out being politically controversial but over time managed to attract widespread and sustained support (i.e. Norwegian literary policy and gender quotas as well as Swedish carbon tax), as the policy effects took hold and changed social norms or altered political opportunity structures (cf. [Patashnik 2008](#)).

The table furthermore suggests that the common denominator across all cases—the sine qua non of being counted as a policy success in the Nordic world—is (moderate to) *high programmatic success that endures over time*. Conversely, the current set of cases does not include those instances where policies *do* good but don’t *look* or *feel* good for a broad array of parties and stakeholders, in other words programmatic successes that nevertheless remain politically precarious (see [Bovens et al. 2001](#) and [McConnell 2010, 2017](#) for examples in other jurisdictions). At the same time, we can see from the table that in a few instances only moderate levels of policy success (for example, Danish cancer treatment policy, where ‘merely’ progress was being made towards catching up with more advanced high-performers abroad) are enough to elicit high levels of political support.

Table 1.2 Degrees of success in the case set

Criteria Chapter nr/Case description	Programmatic success	Process success	Political success	Endurance success
2 DK—organic farming	++	++	++	++
3 DK—wind energy	++	+	++	++
4 DK—childcare	++	++	++	++
5 DK—pensionable age	++	+	++	+
6 DK—cancer treatment	+	++	++	++
7 NO—gender quotas	+	+	+/- to +	++
8 NO—student financing	++	++	++	++
9 NO—literary policy	++	+	+ to ++	++
10 NO—oil fund reforms	++	+/-	++	++
11 SE—budgetary reform	++	+	++	++
12 SE—carbon tax	++	+	+/- to ++	++
13 SE—parental leave	++	+	++	++
14 SE—neutrality	++	+/-	++	++
15 SE—child vaccination	++	+	+	++
16 IS—civil protection	+	++	+	++
17 IS—energy provision	++	+	++	++
18 IS—parental leave	++	++	++	++
19 IS—economic recovery	++	++	+	+
20 FI—baby box	++	++	++	++
21 FI—education quality	+	+/-	++	+
22 FI—conscription	++	++	+	++
23 FI—gender quotas municipalities	++	+/-	-	+
24 FI—homelessness	+	+	++	+

Legend: ++ highly successful; + moderately successful; +/- neither successful nor unsuccessful; -moderately unsuccessful; --highly unsuccessful; 'to' indicates evolving assessment over time. Also, the table reflects the scores by duos of editors based on the final version of all case studies as delivered by the authors (who were not involved in the subsequent scoring effort). The table is for indicative purposes only.

Source: authors

Apparently, sometimes 'good enough' programmatic achievement will do, even in the Nordic region.

With such a track record, one might infer that Nordic authorizing environments for public policymakers continue to maintain high-performance expectations, given that their frame of reference may well be shaped by the relatively plentiful set of instances in which the stars of smart policy design, prudent management of the politics of the policy-making process, and effective policy implementation align. In some of the cases in this volume, this has produced world-leading and identity-conferring initiatives (Danish organic farming and wind energy; Swedish child

vaccination; Swedish and Icelandic gender-equal parental leaves; Finnish comprehensive schools; Norway's oil fund) or swift and bold restorative action after deep policy failure (Iceland's economic recovery after the collapse of its banking system). In other instances, for example in Norway's literary, Finnish conscription and Sweden's neutrality policies, it has enabled enduring nation-wide commitment to idiosyncratic policy stances that few countries in the world have either contemplated or maintained for such long periods of time. By global standards, many of the policies covered here rank as world-leading performances, but perhaps that matters less in the Nordic context, where national policymakers' eyes are first and foremost trained on how a policy performs relative to that of their regional neighbours—which keeps the bar high.

Enablers of Success

Combined, the case studies in this volume provide us with a deep look into the engine rooms of the Nordic machinery of public policymaking. Looking inductively and comparatively, we can see four recurrent factors in the operation of these engine rooms that are worth pointing out to readers of the individual cases studies in advance.

#1 Inclusive policymaking

In keeping with the 'Nordic model' script, many of the cases in this volume feature *consensus-seeking, coalition-building styles of policymaking* that are buffered by strong institutions, respect for deliberation, technocracy and expertise, appeals to shared values and overarching identities, and pragmatic adaptation of policies in response to feedback or changing circumstances. Even though there were quite a few minority governments and frequent changes of coalition to contend with over the years, in many instances the key to both programmatic success and policy endurance is that the policy was supported by what political scientists call 'oversized majorities': a broad spectrum of political parties and organized interests, reaching well beyond the 50%+1 minimalist-majoritarian approach that often prevails in Westminster/Washington-style two-party systems. Epic battles between two ardently opposed advocacy coalitions that take forever to be resolved, are few and far between (with the partial exception of the Swedish carbon tax case).

Indeed, a striking feature of virtually all cases included in the volume is their high longevity, made possible by broad and firm support for the policy's core value proposition. Quite a few cases can be read as confirming the finding by Eric Patashnik (2008) in his comparative study of reform implementation, that once

a policy has been adopted and implemented, this in itself may alter the composition of the relevant policy arena and the relative weight of different actors in it. The Nordic-style policy deals that are characteristically mindful to ensure there are many winners therefore have the side-effect of *'locking in' a broad array of political parties and stakeholder groups who now have something to lose if the new policy gets changed or abandoned*. Swedish neutrality policy is a great example of this endurance-inducing 'something in it for many' approach: nationalists got the commitment to Sweden's autonomy while Social Democrats could use it as a continuing platform for attempts to have Sweden punch above its weight in world affairs (i.e. as an 'honest broker' mediator in international conflicts or a digressing from the NATO-countries' line against left-wing regimes in the Global South).

In the great majority of cases in the volume, the key to success appears to have been the proponents of the policy's propensity to forego the sirens' call of a more combative winner-takes-all mode of political cogitation, opting instead for a more consensual or package-deal-driven approach which may take more time to put together, but in which many parties end up having skin in the game. The institutions enabling this *corporatist-consultative-inclusive route* to policy success commonly associated with the 'Nordic model' include the structures and routines of parliamentary committees, and the tradition of institutionalized consultations of stakeholders (or mini-publics). These strong institutions serve to pace the work of 'getting to yes' about policy reforms, acting as holding environments and institutional incubators and sometimes refrigerators to work through contending policy solutions and mitigate political conflict. Some cases reveal a capacity for institutional innovation that changes the nature of the game. This can be so by providing rules that constrain actors while opening up new conceptual spaces that allow for a process of continuous compromise-making to be facilitated, where previously we could observe less optimal outcomes as a result of an inability of polar opposites to cooperate (Sweden budget reform, Norway the ethical guidelines of the oil fund).

At the same time, the volume also contains numerous examples of successful policies that were driven by relatively closed groups of policy elites and experts. Delegation of policy design work to expert committees vetted by broad-based parliamentary committees, or semi-autonomous agenda-setting by coalitions of experts were at the core of what might be called the *elitist-technocratic route* to policy success. The Norwegian oil fund, the Swedish child vaccination programme, Icelandic energy policy, the Danish pension reform, and the Finnish model for quality in education were all products of this mould.

#2 Anticipatory policymaking

In comparison to the findings of the global and Antipodean volumes on policy successes (Compton and 't Hart 2019; Luetjens et al. 2019), there is a noticeable

dearth of instances of policy changes that were undertaken in response to acute crisis. Iceland's response to the near total collapse of its national economy following the global financial crisis is virtually the only exception and was a case of sheer necessity rather than cunning policymakers 'using a good crisis.' By contrast, quite a few of the instances of policy success in this volume were initiated as pro-active responses to creeping demographic change (Danish pensions), cultural erosion (Norway literary policy), lurking problems of national vulnerabilities (e.g. Norway's resource economy) or likely changes in geopolitical circumstances (Swedish neutrality, Finnish conscription).

In the wind-energy and organic-farming cases, Danish publics were mobilized by depictions of the policy as an example of an alleged national propensity for forward-thinking, and smart and agile innovation. In several cases—such as Icelandic electricity and energy policy, Danish pension reform, Swedish budget policy, or the Norwegian oil fund, we can see the chief policy architects *explicitly taking a long-term perspective as the basis for framing innovative national projects and strategic reforms*. At the same time, in the face of initially robust opposition, they are also astute in timing and pacing the work of reform: leveraging the electoral cycle, surfing on the wings of paradigmatic change in the larger policy context, keeping pace with technological possibilities, and making use of the momentary presence of able, committed, influential individuals in key posts. The cases offer many micro-examples of such leadership, for instance: committed scientists and medical professionals in the Swedish child vaccination case, passionate community advocates in Iceland's civil-protection system, cross-partisan group advocating gender quotas for Finnish executive bodies, prime ministers crafting grand bargains and patiently working many rooms to grease the wheels of compromise, ministers who combine a sense of mission with the wherewithal to strike when the iron is hot, and senior bureaucrats or secretaries to expert inquiries or parliamentary committees playing the policy game.

In order to achieve these far-sighted goals, policymakers sometimes put the human proclivity for short-sightedness to good use to *'smuggle in' reforms that have major long-term implications but pose relatively modest short-term changes or costs*. This phenomenon, known from cognitive psychology and behaviour economics (Thaler and Benartzi 2004), can be leveraged in order to get things under way. Three of our cases come to mind: Norway making the decision to establish what was de facto an oil fund at a point in time when there were no monies available to deposit there, hence the sacrifice of saving was postponed. Denmark and her pension reform linking retirement age to increased life expectancy again affecting real long-term change with a minimum of costs up front. We can also see much of the same effect with the Swedish carbon tax: low levels and important exemptions from the start, but as the Social Democrats said at the time, it was a 'good start' (which turned out to be accurate).

#3 Powerful metanarratives

Furthermore, another striking feature across a range of cases was the *enduring normative power of the welfare-state metanarrative*. For example, in Sweden, the notion of the *Folkhemmet* (the home of the people) and in Denmark that of the *Velfærdssamfundet* (the welfare society) serve as such normative anchors. In fact, large segments of the community in all five countries appear to pride themselves on being considered socially progressive, including being seen to be world-leading on measures to advance gender equality and progressive family policies, including earmarked parental leave—successful in Sweden and Iceland—and universally available high-quality childcare—in Denmark. Proposed policy changes or institutional reforms were often claimed to be perfecting, expanding or preserving the national welfare state, in which all citizens have high standards of living, including wages, well-being, the ideal of gender equality and other symbols that appeal to national sensibilities. Thus, rather than inviting criticism, making such claims has evidently helped proponents of a particular policy mobilize public acceptance for them. Examples include Norwegian student finances, Icelandic paid and earmarked parental leave, Danish early childhood education and care, the Finnish baby box and Finland’s Housing First policy.

This stands in stark contrast with policymaking in the Anglo countries where even proponents of progressive social policy reforms would rather cut their tongue than rhetorically appeal to the welfare state, which in these systems has become equated with an overbearing, bureaucratized, unaffordable, negatively loaded ‘nanny state,’ or indeed to any other superordinate goals or overarching value. Not so in the Nordic countries, where referring to dismantling the welfare state has proved a politically precarious posture for any political party to take, and where appeals to social solidarity across class, gender, geographic and generational fault lines have always been part of the armoury of policy reformers. This is the case even when keeping public expenditure at bay lies at the heart of a proposed policy, as in the cases of Danish pension and Swedish budgetary reform.

In fact, in the cases of Finnish conscription, Swedish neutrality, Icelandic civil protection and Norway’s literary policies, key policy architects and supporters commonly *frame them as identity-conferring projects*, appealing to shared notions of an overarching ‘we’ that large segments of the population ascribe to. The Nordic nations have until very recently understood themselves as small, cohesive, ethno-culturally homogenous societies, where such centripetal appeals to superordinate identities can be made with relative ease, and where overarching storylines and rhetorical tropes can be situated in jointly revered historical achievements or jointly remembered episodes of adversity. For example, many Swedes appear to be receptive to claims that a particular policy is part of a distinctive ‘Swedish middle way’. The broad support for what turned out to be a virtually unique but also a widely debated strategy for dealing with Covid-19 is a case in point of just

how powerful that implicit sense of national idiosyncrasy might still be. Likewise, Finns were actively reminded of their heroic young-state military bravura against the Russian bear, as part of the effort to embed and sustain the policy of conscription in national mythology (as of February 2022, such reminding was no longer necessary). And while the baby box in Finland was initially a poverty-prevention mechanism, it eventually became part of a national identity, embraced by all parents.

However, the normative power of this meta-discourse, which originates in an era when the Nordic countries were made up of homogenous large majority populations, now faces forces of erosion. Most of the Nordic societies now contain sizable groups whose cultures are not steeped in an integrative ideal of Nordic inclusiveness provided for by a benevolent state and extending to all stages of life. For example, in the Danish childcare case, some groups were not keen to have their children socialized in childcare institutions. Also, the long-term growth in immigration in the Nordic countries has fuelled welfare-chauvinist policies that negatively target migrants and thus break with the ideal of the universal welfare state (cf. [Careja and Harris 2022](#)).

#4 Imitation and coupling

There are several instances where successful policies have been partially enabled or facilitated by policy learning and coupling disparate initiatives into inter-linked reform packages. The Swedish budget reform, which was crafted in the shadow of other reform initiatives that attracted more public attention, is one example. Similarly, the Swedish carbon tax might not have happened if it were not for the 1989 tax reform, which created a need for new revenues to compensate for reduced income taxes. Similarly, the spending rule pertaining to the Norwegian oil fund came packaged with a central bank reform that de facto gave the central bank the power to ‘punish’ policymakers with higher interest rates if it deemed their choices to be irresponsible. Hence, in light of these experiences, there are good reasons to carefully consider the ‘embeddedness’ of successful policy programmes in relation to other overlapping and nested public policies. This is a recognition of policy interdependence where the programmatic design of novel policy solutions is partially shaped or enabled by other public policies.

The Nordic success stories have not evolved in isolation. Several chapters in this volume provide examples of *lesson-drawing and transfer of policy ideas* across and beyond the Nordic region. This has been a multi-directional process, where countries in some cases have served as ‘front-runners’ and inspired other countries to follow, while in other cases they have taken inspiration from abroad. Swedish child vaccination policy, for instance, served as an exemplary model, guiding joint efforts by the Red Cross and UNICEF to develop children’s vaccination against tuberculosis in post-war Europe. Similarly, the reserved months policy in

parental leave schemes has been depicted as one of Sweden's and Iceland's major policy exports as many other countries have followed suit (Windwehr et al. 2021). Another example is how other countries have taken Norway's lead on the issue of gender quotas on corporate boards. Yet another example is the Danish model of pension reform, which is now being emulated in other Nordic countries (see Kvist and von Nordheim this volume).

A word of caution is in order here. The cases in this volume tell tales of accomplishment, but we should not blind ourselves to the rationalist fallacy of thinking that the observable fact that things turned out well in terms of the criteria in the PPPE framework necessarily means that the policies in question were forged with purpose and foresight. Nordic policymakers are still bounded-rational 'cognitive misers' with lots on their plates, with complex pluralist policy arenas to be straddled, and perennial political fires to be fought in real time. So, readers should not be surprised to learn that some of the successes in this volume were *not* the product of grand plans and comprehensive strategies to enact them, but rather of fledgling, incremental initiatives that only happened to 'add up' over time. The evolution of Iceland's civil-protection system is a case in point. Conversely, some policies, such as the Finnish baby box, have endured not because they still meet urgent needs, but because they have unintentionally become identity-conferring symbols. So, whilst there is much to celebrate and learn from in the cases of this volume, reader should see through the myths of any 'Nordic model' and focus on the realities of policymaking on a case-by-case basis.

Where To From Here?

Although it has been designed first and foremost as a pedagogical exercise (producing teachable cases along with a conceptual toolkit for discerning and debating policy success), this volume's yield may nevertheless inspire future studies of policy success—either within or beyond the Nordic region. By way of closing this introduction to the volume, we offer some directions that such future studies might helpfully explore. These directions represent suggested avenues for policy success scholarship and are not intended as an exhaustive research agenda. In addition, we encourage readers to identify and elaborate other crucial elements of policy success, which can aid in advancing the understanding of the phenomenon across cases and contexts.

#1. Take the design and use of the assessment framework to the next level

The current PPPE framework is primarily a heuristic argumentation map to support qualitative-interpretive assessments of policies. It offers suggested indicators for each of the four major assessment criteria but does not specify their

operationalization or the relative weight they are to be accorded in arriving at synthetic judgements concerning the degree of success and failure on each criterion. Nor does it consider the possibility of according different weights to the four criteria themselves. This leaves the use of the model open to the different normative and analytical propensities of its users. Consequentialist scholars might, for example, be inclined to give far more weight to programmatic and political than to process assessment, whereas appropriateness scholars might favour the latter.

#2. Contrast and compare cases on opposite (or multiple) positions on the success-failure continuum

A sine qua non for explanatory studies is controlled variation on the values of both dependent and possible independent variables in the phenomenon of interest. This means, for example, systematic case sampling so as to achieve pair-wise or broader batch-wise comparisons of both successful and failed policies/reforms in otherwise comparable settings, that is, longitudinal comparisons of different attempts to reform pensions, to implement 'green' farming practices, or to change the energy mix both within (over-time, within-country comparison) or across (in-time, cross-country comparison) certain Nordic countries. When this is done meticulously, research might be able to isolate what (configurations of) factors account for these differential results. Within-case longitudinal comparisons—assessing policies and reforms at different points in time—can be especially illuminating, as they may point us to non-random patterns in the sequencing of failures and successes within a particular policy domain. In other words, such comparisons might allow us to deepen our insight into the policy folklore that 'failure breeds success' (through policy-oriented learning) and that 'success breeds failure' (through complacency)(cf. [Hemerijck and Schludi 2000](#)).

#3. Infuse the study of policy success with explanatory allure

Currently, the study of policy implementation offers many more *ex post facto* accounts of how and why policies have disappointed or even failed outright than there are explanations of policies that have succeeded. Yet, there are many reasons to believe that success cannot simply be achieved by avoiding the known causes of policy fiascos. Excellence in public policy is not just about dodging the bullets of political and bureaucratic folly. At the same time the field of public-policy studies does offer rich strands of explanation-focused theory and research on agenda-setting and policy change as well as a host of generic frameworks of the policy process, yet these generally stay away from questions of success and failure

(Cairney 2019; Weible and Sabatier 2017). Meanwhile, there is growing prescriptive literature on ‘policy design’ that implies we already have robust knowledge of ‘what works when’ in selecting goals, instruments and delivery mechanisms for public programmes and projects (Howlett 2019; Howlett and Mukherjee 2020). Something is missing in between: there is a relative dearth of studies explicitly theorizing and then testing what combinations of factors—agency-centric as well as contextual/structural—may account for observable differences in degrees of (programmatic, process, political and endurance) success. There are plenty of candidate hypotheses and social mechanisms that have been proposed over the years to fill the gap. What is needed now are studies that take it upon themselves to test them in robust comparative designs.

#4. Leverage insights about success to help tackle on pervasive policy problems

A related and important avenue for future work is to explore whether and how insights about the nuts and bolts of policy success can be used to inform efforts to address some of today’s most pressing societal problems. What is offered in this volume is not a complete ‘script’ for crafting programmes and policies for the betterment of society. Nevertheless, an important next step is to think about whether and how the drivers and enablers of success identified by the contributors to this volume can be leveraged to achieve shifts in policy areas plagued by widespread popular criticism, questioning of the ability of public institutions to do their job, and evidence of negative societal or environmental outcomes. What lessons can be offered for policymaking to address the most pervasive problems? This challenge calls for continued dialogues regarding how to effectively exploit experiences from past successes to inform efforts to address enduring societal challenges, while avoiding known fallacies of analogical reasoning and unsuccessful policy transfer.

Suggesting this ambition prompts a return to the factors we identified earlier as being enablers of success, particularly the ability to organize inclusive policy processes that are anticipatory in their orientation and, ideally, identity-confirming in their use of metanarratives. In turn this raises two questions. Firstly, to what degree do these Nordic enabling factors depend on cultural and institutional legacies that are neither presently enjoyed nor easily replicated in other regions and states? At this point it could be useful to distinguish between mechanisms that may be idiosyncratic because they are rooted in such legacies as high degrees of trust and a tradition for compromise politics, and those that hold more promise in terms of being reproduceable outside the Nordic context because they are rooted in universal mechanisms. An example of such a universal mechanism is the utilization of human short-sightedness in the design of policies seeking to attain long-term goals.

Secondly, in the case of the Nordic countries themselves, to what degree are these legacy factors as influential today as they once were? The endurance criterion used to select success cases implies that most if not all of our cases had their formative moments a fair way back: none of them were decided upon ‘yesterday’. As already noted, the Nordics have not been spared recent trends such as increasing (wealth and income) inequality, social media driven echo-chamber conflict, climate, environmental degradation and disasters, disengaged youths, violent gangs, hate crimes and home-grown terrorist attacks. Thus, we cannot take for granted that the high levels of trust (interpersonal and institutional) and the culture of compromise that arguably lay behind the success enablers will continue to facilitate Nordic policymaking to quite the same degree in the future.

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