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## **Reflections on Government Success and Failure**

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# **Reflections on Government Success and Failure**

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## ***Abstract***

This discussion offers a survey of changes in the world that might impact the ability to solve policy problems as outlined initially in Glazer and Rothenberg (2001). While the basic premises of the original analysis hold, interrelated political and economic changes have occurred in ways that would produce a far different monograph than was authored roughly a quarter-century ago. Politically, four changes are highlighted: (1) polarization, (2) private politics, (3) globalization, and (4) media diversification. Economically, three notable features are also discussed: (1) industrial organization; (2) supply and value chains; and (3) artificial intelligence. While no universal statement can be offered, changes in these features, both individually and interactively, provide additional opportunities and new obstacles for policy successes to be realized.

## ***Key Words***

artificial intelligence  
globalization  
industrial organization  
polarization  
private politics  
social media  
supply chains

More than two decades ago (2001), economist Amihai Glazer and I (a political scientist by training) jointly authored a monograph titled *Why Government Succeeds and Why it Fails*. Our goal was to integrate insights from the studies of economics and politics to isolate often non-obvious determinants of when government may succeed in policy endeavors and when it may fail. We focused on applying four core concepts: (1) credibility; (2) rational expectations; (3) crowding (in and out); and (4) multiple equilibria to study possibilities for policy successes and failures. We attempted, in turn, to apply these concepts to offer something meaningful about (1) macroeconomics, (2) redistribution; (3) production; and (4) regulation. We also strived to relate these concerns to differences in political institutions. Finally, we offered some general lessons about what conditions or actions might foster successful policy.<sup>1</sup>

Having authored such a text, the organizers of this forum suggested that I generate an issue brief updating and reconsidering these arguments in view of both experiences and developments in social science research. Given my acceptance of this mantle, perhaps hastily (particularly given the “problem solving” focus, and emphasis on political science per se given the approach of our monograph is particularly interdisciplinary), I will do my best. I should add the caveat that in the decades following I have kept up with some of the broad policy areas that Glazer and I discussed more than others, and that my particular policy expertise centers around environmental policy. Also, my focus will be American-centric given the nature of the audience, although I believe that much of the discussion should be broadly generalizable.

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<sup>1</sup> In short order, these are (1) manipulate the few (to induce crowding); (2) the possibility of failure may induce success (e.g., by inducing endogenous support); (3) policy can benefit from ignorance (e.g., so that rational expectations does not undo the intended effects of government policy); (4) inefficiency may be efficient (e.g., by establishing incentives for investment); and; and (5) the power of weak institutions (e.g., by insuring policy continuance in instances where strong institutions could quickly reverse policy).

Having been asked to reconsider the text that I authored so many years ago, there are several jarring and interrelated changes in the political and economic worlds that require acknowledgement. I am confident that they would have altered the book that we authored. Since this is designed as a short brief, I can only sketch some of these changes before suggesting (again, in brief) their potential implications for solving policy concerns.

### **Changes in Politics and the Economy**

Observing how the world has evolved and insights from nearly a quarter century of academic work could produce a long litany of potentially relevant political and economic changes. For brevity, I select those for politics and economics that seem most relevant.

#### **Politics**

The landscape has changed dramatically, and in often unanticipated directions, since the 1990s when Glazer and I were cogitating about the world. Much scholarship reflects this. Here I direct our attention to four such changes.

Perhaps the disjunction receiving the most attention is the tremendous and long-term increase in the level of *polarization*—typically discussed as the divergence of political attitudes away from the ideological center and towards the ideological extremes. Polarization has been noted in political institutions, geographically, between parties, and across the rural and urban divides. In more recent years, we have witnessed politicians trying to counter the effects of polarization, be it through weakening of the filibuster and the rejection of norms (such as the ability to get a vote on a Supreme Court justice nominee) in the United States Senate (e.g., Reynolds 2017) to increasing claims of presidential authority (Calabresi and Yoo 2008, Dodds 2019) to politicization of judicial appointments (e.g., Ferejohn 2002) to more aggressiveness by states and localities in terms of policy initiatives (e.g., DellaVigna and Kim 2022). Hence, scholars (political scientists especially) have put a great deal of sweat equity into measuring polarization at the elite and mass, and the national and subnational, levels (e.g., Fiorina and Abrams 2008, Bonica 2013, Jordan and Bowling 2016, McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2016; Lieberman, Mettler, and Roberts 2021; Shor and McCarty 2022; Brown and Mettler 2024), not to mention its policy implications and the myriad reactions to provide workarounds. While

polarization was certainly on the rise when Glazer and I were writing (e.g., Poole and Rosenthal 2000), its longevity and full implications were unimaginable to us (despite the two of us meeting at Carnegie Mellon where Poole, Rosenthal, and McCarty produced their initial groundbreaking scholarship).

Another related (as it represents an alternative means of influence when governments are polarized and gridlocked) and notable change has been the rise of so-called *private politics* (e.g., Baron 2003, 2014; Abito, Besanko, and Diermeier 2019). Private politics represents the attempt of organized interests, often characterized as activists or non-governmental organizations, to impact directly the choices that businesses make. Conventional politics often looms in the shadows. Many of the concerns of private politics, be it climate change, greenwashing, labor conditions, corporate governance, and ESG (environment, social, and governance) investing, have been followed by formal government actions in the United States and the European Union. The rise and study of private politics was in a nascent stage when our monograph was authored (we certainly did not consider it), but it exploded both in reality and in scholarly attention in the subsequent years.

A third (and, again, related) change has been the *globalization* of problems and solutions (e.g., Berger and Dore 2018). These effects have been felt especially heavily in the aftermath of the COVID-19 epidemic (e.g., Edwards 2021) but also have been reflected in foundational environmental problems such as mitigating or adapting to climate change and biodiversity threats and have extended even to considerations such as the fairness of elections. While there have always been concerns centered around international relations and trade, the diversity of such considerations was only beginning to heighten when Glazer and I authored our text in the run up to the millennium.

Finally, another change has been the *diversification* of conventional media and the rise of social media (e.g., Bode 2016, Lipka and Shearer 2023). The decline of traditional news outlets and the rise of alternative sources, many with strong ideological biases, has led to concerns of citizens living in echo chambers (e.g., Cinelli et al., 2021). To a substantial degree these sources have been replaced and even supplanted by social media (Zhuravskaya, Petrova,

and Enikolopov 2020).. Among many other impacts, these changes have fractured the information and perspectives to which private citizens are subject. They at least raise the prospect that it is far easier for subgroups to believe that quite different states of the world exist; that, to paraphrase one very famous depiction, there are “alternate facts.”<sup>2</sup>

## **Economy**

Economically, there have also been notable changes, especially related to the international concerns sketched above. These too should have implications for how policy functions and the way that policy problems might get solved. Here we focus on three such features.

One notable difference from when Glazer and I were writing involves the *industrial organization of firms*. Notably, the vertical integration of firms has declined markedly, particularly in the sense that firms tend to rely on large networks of suppliers, often located in other nation-states. Outsourcing has risen dramatically (for an early discussion, see Bhagwati, Panagariya, and Srinivasan. 2002).<sup>3</sup> Although some of the impacts of such outsourcing has garnered attention in the public sphere, neither political scientists nor political economists have spent much time considering the impacts that outsourcing has on the ability to solve problems.<sup>4</sup> While Glazer and I touched on vertical integration (notably suggesting that vertically

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<sup>2</sup> Related to this has been the more recent rise of artificial intelligence, which has the potential, among other things, to further impact flows of information received not only by citizens but by government decision-makers (e.g., Callander and Lee 2024).

<sup>3</sup> Foci of analyses of vertical integration are typically on features such as contractual frictions (for a review, see Bresnahan and Levin 2012). For my discussion, the key considerations are that increasingly firms rely on those who are outside their formal boundaries. I should also note that explaining decisions such as foreign direct investment have received considerable scholarly attention in political science and economics (e.g., Helpman 2006).

<sup>4</sup> It is widely acknowledged that such outsourcing can impact key factors such as supply chains.

integrated firms could more successfully resist regulation), we failed to anticipate just how quickly and dramatically the world would change.

Related to this decline in vertical integration, and as has been highlighted by the recent national election, are *changes in supply and value chains* producing goods and services (supply chains involving the movement of a good or service from supplier to customer, value chains being the points where actual value is added). Notably, contemporary supply and value chains are characterized by much more international trade and multinational production across the developing and developed worlds than the world that Glazer and I considered (indeed, we did not really contemplate the implications of such features). In short, not only are many of the key policy problems of our time inherently international, but these changes in supply and value chains—and their too often seeming lack of resilience—have meant that inputs, including intellectual property, appear more vulnerable to perturbations in the world (e.g., Baldwin and Freeman 2022). This has meant that many considerations can be less controlled domestically unless effective steps are taken to move them back onshore, as symbolized for example by the 2022 CHIPS and Science Act which was designed to reshore critical inputs.

A third change that is rapidly unfolding is the *growth of artificial intelligence (AI)*. AI involves the development of computer systems that can perform tasks that normally require human intelligence (e.g., United States Executive Office of the President 2016). It has the potential to create great gains in social welfare—e.g., by improving the quality of medical care and its delivery (e.g., Al-Antari 2023) or by inducing innovation (Gonzalez 2023), to name a few—while being economically, politically, and socially disruptive.<sup>5</sup> The need to lead in, while at the same time effectively regulate, AI has certainly impacted how the other economic changes mentioned above are considered. And, certainly, AI is not a feature that Glazer and I were anticipating even remotely nearly a quarter of a century ago.

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<sup>5</sup> I have cogitated about these considerations elsewhere (e.g., IAST 2024).

## **Updating *When Government Succeeds and Fails*—Implications for Problem Solving**

One could author a long tome on how these changes, particularly given their myriad interactions, would impact the features that Glazer and I highlighted. Here I will need to limit myself to a sketch of a subset of such influences. To organize the discussion, I will principally discuss the four key concepts, which are themselves interrelated, that we focused upon in our original monograph.

### **Credibility**

Perhaps the most notable changes involve credibility directly and the factors that influence it. The impacts of these political and economic changes on credibility are multiple and impact the relevance of the other features that we highlight.

An obvious place to begin for problem solving is polarization. Polarization in many ways has been the *bête noire* of trying to solve policy concerns (e.g., see the collections in Lee and McCarty 2019 and Lieberman, Mettler, and Roberts 2022, but see Curry and Lee 2020). After all, if a policy needs to be addressed statutorily and such outputs cannot be generated then there would seem to be a problem—and, for example, overcoming polarization has been used as a rallying cry for those advocating a strengthened American presidency (e.g., Howell and Moe 2016, but see Judd and Rothenberg 2020).

Conversely, polarization would seem to be associated with greater credibility of policy when changes are made.<sup>6</sup> In some circumstances the polarized system may make policies difficult to undo. Not only may statutory updating or changes be problematic and experiences of beneficiaries may create support for the new status quo, but private sector investment can

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<sup>6</sup> As foreshadowed, this increasingly comes with caveats due to the strategic responses of political actors. For example, a strong executive might try to assert powers that would undermine the ability of policymakers to do their jobs, such as through politicization of the bureaucracy and reductions in its expertise and size and with protection from a politicized judiciary or otherwise undermining the courts. On the other hand, the nature of appointments in both the bureaucracy and the judiciary may serve to strengthen credibility.



provide further support or lessen opposition. Consider the Affordable Care Act, which was passed when Democrats had a rare Senate supermajority in 2009. One principal effect of the Act was to expand health care coverage. This, in turn, increased medical provision for services requiring investment (suggesting that providers forecasted the Act's continuation), such as surgeries (e.g., Eguia et al., 2018). This should increase support for the Act's continuation, which many believe will continue to survive even during the second term of an initially extremely hostile president. Thus, the impact of polarization on credibility may be, under some conditions (e.g., particularly the need to incentivize investment to induce time consistency) positive and may be a feature that policymakers can exploit.<sup>7</sup>

Further, polarization's increasingly geographic nature in the United States may provide policymakers with opportunities. Most notably, some large market states, California being the most obvious, are positioned to move forward solutions to problems such as climate change, particularly with respect to sources such as transportation where there is a national/global marketplace.<sup>8</sup> Spillovers in such circumstances can be considerable. Even when there is not such a market, innovations and transparency can result in analogous diffusions and spillovers. Thus, to the extent that policymakers can induce such state actions or at least protect preemptions, polarization (or at least the strong commitment of certain subnational actors) can be employed as a problem-solving tool in some circumstances.

Private politics may provide another means by which policies can be made more credible. To the extent that private politics pushes actors into adopting behaviors and making investments and reputation-burnishing commitments, it may lay the groundwork for

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<sup>7</sup> This was also a tactic of the Biden administration after the 2024 election, where there was a mad rush to get funds invested in the economy (e.g., to produce electric vehicles) in a manner that cannot be clawed back and will create endogenous support.

<sup>8</sup> However, this ability to move policy will be true with respect to concerns where innovations are necessary to produce a solution or where mandated transparency (e.g., in emissions of greenhouse gases, another issue that California is at the forefront) will have a substantial effect.

subsequent public solutions.<sup>9</sup> Again, looking at the environmental realm, firms have been pushed for years to make carbon emissions public, to manage their supply chains, and to adopt the long-term responsibilities for their products. While such efforts may be seen as insufficient, many firms have taken steps in these directions and responded to increased globalization by creating their own harmonized rules and standards. All such actions may make policy efforts more likely to be successful, particularly if they build on the efforts that are being made prior. For example, one means of dealing with climate change that may seem particularly attractive now will be pushes for adoption of state-of-the-art nuclear facilities, as large firms such as Microsoft have reputational stakes in being socially responsible as well as needs for huge increases in the amount of energy that they consume with the advent of AI.<sup>10</sup>

The logic of dealing with globalization writ large is similar. While managing global problems is notoriously difficult, there are situations where globalization can present opportunities. Notably, policies in other polities may present opportunities for policymakers at home. For example, the EU has been at the forefront of many progressive initiatives, such as with respect to climate, chemicals, and labor in developing nations specifically or ESG concerns more generally. Relevant interests forced to follow such dictates may be willing to “cut deals” that institutionalize harmonization of rules in response (for an example with respect to regulation of industrial chemicals, see Rothenberg 2018). Thus, if climate change specifically is a general problem and providing investors with information about climate risk a specific policy, fashioning policies that mesh with those adopted elsewhere—be they in Sacramento or Brussels—is advisable. Such policy initiatives will be seen as more acceptable because there will be endogenous support. Put differently, policymakers need to search for opportunities to take advantage by being sensitive to the global (and the federal) environment.

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<sup>9</sup> Although self-regulation may be designed to resist public action (Egorov and Harstad 2018).

<sup>10</sup> Hence, Microsoft is the driving force behind getting parts of the Three Mile Island nuclear facility back online.

## Rational Expectations

Changes in the world outlined above may have considerable impact on the strength of rational expectations.<sup>11</sup> In particular, the combinations of AI and the evolving structures of media suggest that in some situations rational expectations may be stronger and in other instances they may be weaker.

For instance, to the extent that AI is employed in a manner that generates more accurate predictions about the state of the world present and future, rational expectations should be stronger. As we made clear in our monograph, this may not always lead to more successful policy (e.g., if I believe that subsequent taxes may go up, I may be more inclined to pocket my stimulus check rather than spend it as policymakers would hope while, if I believe this is “free money” I will be more likely to go out and stimulate the economy). Alternatively, to the degree that AI is employed to obfuscate the state of the world—examples of which we can all imagine—then rational expectations may weaken. For example, it is easy to envision a situation where individuals or groups of decision-makers are pushed to believe that the government is committed or not committed to limiting inflation. These molded expectations, in turn, will change how much they would pay for a home, impacting the housing market in ways that may or may not conform with the desire of policymakers to want housing prices to stabilize in a manner balancing the existing stock’s affordability with builders being incentivized to increase supply.

The effects of fragmented media should be somewhat analogous (but see Yang et al., 2020). Years ago, a smaller, more homogenous, media may have pushed those consuming information to have relatively similar expectations. Now, information comes from such a multiplicity and diversity of sources that updating of expectations is likely to differ. For example, one set of citizens may believe that immigration produces a needed low-wage labor force and resources to support social welfare programs such as Social Security; another may be

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<sup>11</sup> Rational expectations are typically defined as depending on human rationality, available information, and experiences. Here we are emphasizing the informational component.

led to believe that immigration produces workers taking jobs to which others are entitled and adds huge costs in society in terms of social services and safety. Policymakers may have their work cut out for them or be incentivized to initially implement programs principally affecting those with more positive dispositions with the hope that there will be positive spillovers. Further, with so many information sources, attempts by political leaders (presumably working with policymakers) to manage expectations through jawboning and other means of exhortation are considerably reduced relative to yesteryear.<sup>12</sup> Thus, policymakers may find themselves with relatively accessible means of molding expectations of one subgroup or another, which may allow policy successes in a limited sense. They also may need to worry less that there are common expectations that might undermine policy success.

### **Crowding In (or Out)**

The focus on crowding in or out is that government policymaking efforts may induce other efforts that will affect policy change or merely substitute for private initiatives. For example, if government support of research or investment in physical capacities leads to synergistic actions, for instance by firms due to strategic complementarities, then we have crowding in that may affect meaningful changes.

Perhaps the most relevant changes outlined previously in our discussion are the globalization of concerns and the rise of private politics. Other outside actors, such as political entities and private actors may induce crowding in of the sort that policymakers can take advantage. Similarly, policymakers may be able to coordinate with others to induce hoped for crowding, e.g., in trying to deal with climate change, the current hope is that enough contributions will be provided by relevant political actors (particularly nation-states) that businesses themselves will then be incentivized to make considerable additional investments. Thus, policymakers need to be alert for opportunities where crowding in opportunities exist.

Additionally, policymakers could try and take advantage of AI's growth and the increasing segmentation of media to produce messages that will appeal to subgroups in ways

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<sup>12</sup> Jawboning and exhortation are especially associated with macroeconomic policy.

that will crowd in behavior. For example, public health messages or efforts to induce responsible saving for retirement may be tailorable to specific subgroups in ways that were previously far more difficult. And, when members of specific subgroups observe increased prevalence of certain behaviors by others in the subgroup there may be crowding in.

### **Multiple Equilibria**

Many of the features noted above apply to multiple equilibria. Policymakers can try and take advantage of initial efforts by NGOs to steer which policies get selected. They can particularly focus on market leaders and those with complicated supply and value chains to manage, with the hope that crowding will induce others to follow suit.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, they can try and take advantage of new AI technologies and new means of communication, perhaps aided by insights from behavior economics (e.g., Lowenstein and Chater 2017), to induce the selection of one equilibrium over another. Polarization, particularly its geographic nature, may also make different equilibria selection more possible. Getting some actors in a given area to act in a specific manner may lead others to mimic or behave in herd behavior. This may be further reinforced by government actions in polarized states or regions, be they in a progressive or more conservative direction depending on the relevant dispositions.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

I still believe in the perspective in *Why Government Succeeds and Why it Fails*. However, the world has changed dramatically in ways that would have produced a monograph with a substantially different tone. I have sketched several features deserving particular highlighting.

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<sup>13</sup> Of course, this can work in both more and less progressive ways. The Trump administration may succeed in inducing roll backs of DEI and other similar “WOKE” programs by pushing some market leaders to capitulate (e.g., Walmart) and counting on others to follow along just as others may have induced the reverse in previous periods.

These features are relevant for the way that the political landscape, the nature of the problems confronted, and the economic features that condition problem solving.

For the organizers of this symposium, my analysis may seem a bit opaque and disappointing. The factors highlighted should impact how problems are defined and how solutions might be determined. However, they certainly do not provide a “one size fits all” means for defining problems or generating solutions. Nor do they provide a specific recommendation of what data sources could be brought to bear. Further, consistent with the nature of the original monograph, my discussion highlights the jointness of insights from political science and economics rather than political science per se.

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