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Rethinking disproportionate policy making by introducing proportionate politics

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Abstract

This article seeks to critique and extend recent work in the policy sciences, by Maor in particular, on disproportionate policy making—including policy overreaction and underreaction. While the disproportionate policy making thesis does help address assumptions that something is amiss in the policy process by capturing an imbalance between policy problems and the interventions to address them, we argue that it does not pay sufficient attention to politics. We present a heuristic which includes political perception of both programme and political threats. Our core argument is that much of what is considered disproportionate policy making, can in fact also be considered proportionate politics. Our analysis paves the way for a more holistic and political understanding of policy dynamics.

Keywords Disproportionate policy making · Policy overreaction · Policy underreaction · Policy dynamics · Policy sciences

Introduction

The vision by Lasswell and others in the 1950s of a policy sciences dedicated to societal betterment is manifested in the policy cycle (Lasswell, 1956, 1971). With its emphasis on policy makers addressing societal problems through evidence-based deliberation, public interest decision-making and continual process of evaluation and learning, it portrays an idealism of policy processes where ends and means of public policy making are closely aligned in the public interest. While the policy cycle is still very much alive in aspirational terms among policy practitioners and certainly in much of the public rhetoric of politicians and policy makers, policy studies have produced many plausible reasons (such as powerful coalition, path dependency and policy maker self-interest) why policy making does not

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always conform to such ideals (for an overview, see Weible & Sabatier, 2018; Cairney, 2020). One of the newest challenges to our understanding of departures from policy-cycle-type idealism is the literature on disproportionate policy making.

The framework originates from the extensive work of Maor (2012, 2014a, 2014b, 2017a, 2017b, 2017c, 2018, 2019a, 2019b, 2020, 2021) which relies on robust findings in political psychology (e.g. overconfidence), public administration (e.g. organisational sources of policy persistence) and public policy to develop the concept of disproportionality in public policy. Disproportionality manifests itself as policy underreaction and policy overreaction. In essence, it seeks to capture, to put it crudely, policy makers either ‘not doing enough’ and/or doing so ‘too late’, or ‘doing too much’ and/or doing it ‘too soon’. The language of disproportionality is the equivalent of waving a ‘red flag’ to signal that something is amiss in the policy making process. It conveys impressions of ineffective policy makers, departing from the logic of the policy cycle and producing outcomes that are ultimately costly to society.

The framework provided by Maor has provided a great service to the discipline of policy studies, including the identification of detailed mechanisms at work that can produce and perpetuate disproportionate dynamics—including the role of emotions, risk perception, information processing and bureaucratic culture. Yet for all the analytical benefits, as we will argue, ironically it is less useful in understanding many of the political forces that drive policy making, as well as the political outcomes that should be factored into assessments of policy disproportionality. More recent work (Howlett & Kemmerling, 2017; Maor, 2017b, 2017c, 2019b, 2020, 2021), as will be shown, has begun to recognise that limited political imperatives such as catering to public opinion can intentionally drive disproportionate policy making. We welcome this recognition, but it also has significant weaknesses to the point—as we will argue—that its portrayal of underreaction and overreaction, is a partial conceptualisation of policy dynamics that fails to capture broader political forces at work.

The goal of this paper, drawing on multiple brief illustrative examples, is to revisit the Maor framework for understanding disproportionate policy making and present the main elements of an alternative framework. At its core is *proportionate politics* and an argument what much of the dynamics of public policy are better understood through proportionate politics, rather than disproportionate policy making.

The disproportionate policy making thesis: core elements and limitations

The key elements of disproportionate policy making and its implications are set out across a series of publications (Maor, 2012, 2017b, 2018, 2019a, 2019b, 2021; Maor et al., 2017; De Francesco & Magetti, 2018; Gillard & Lock, 2017; Howlett & Kemmerling, 2017; Jones et al., 2014; Leiren et al., 2021; Meyer, 2016; Peters et al., 2017; Tosun & Peters, 2021). The foundations of the literature are in the definition of disproportionate policy making as ‘a lack of “fit” or balance between the costs of a public policy and the benefits derived from this policy, and between policy ends and means’ (Maor, 2017a: 384).

Maor anchors the analysis in two divergent phenomena. He distinguishes between unintentional, non-intentional and intentional disproportionality (Howlett & Kemmerling, 2017; Maor, 2017a, 2018, 2021; Upadhyaya et al. 2021). While intentional disproportionality is the result of some sort of error in the decision-making process, intentional

disproportionality refers to situations in which policy makers deliberately overreach or underreact when addressing a problem. Recently non-intentional disproportionality has been added to the framework as an intermediate category in which policy makers adopt policies which are not intended to be implemented, but nevertheless have some unintended impact (Maor, 2021). It has not been conceptually developed to the same degree as the other two categories. Therefore, we concentrate on unintentional and intentional disproportionality in the following discussion. Within these two categories of disproportionality, Maor differentiates between policy overreaction and underreaction. Overreaction is defined as ‘a policy that imposes objective and/or perceived social costs without producing offsetting objective and/or perceived benefits’ (Maor, 2012: 232), while he defines the underreaction as a ‘systematically slow and/or insufficient response by policy makers to increased risk or opportunity, or no response at all’ (Maor, 2014a: 426).

Maor suggests that unintentional policy overreaction has four main modes or variations. *Pre-emptive overreaction*, occurs when ‘policy-makers overestimate information regarding a negative event (Maor, 2012: 232). An example would be policy makers misperceiving the likely impact of a looming crisis, and so there is a form of ‘overkill’ reaction, such as the slaughtering in the UK of roughly 5 million cattle as a precautionary measure to prevent the incubation and spread of ‘mad cow’ disease Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE) through the food chain (Maor, 2012). *Regulatory overreaction* is when ‘policy-makers accurately estimate information regarding a negative event’ (Maor, 2012: 232). This produces an aggressive information search, as well as a far-reaching law enforcement reforms, as occurred in the USA after 9/11 (Maor, 2017a, 2017b, 2017c). *Calibrated overreaction* refers to when ‘policy-makers overestimate information regarding a positive event’ (Maor, 2012: 232). In other words, they believe, based on new ideas or models that significant benefits will be guaranteed by applying the insights therein. Hence there is zealous policy reform such as happened in New Zealand in the 1980s and 1990s with its extensive public management reforms (Maor, 2017a, 2017b, 2017c). *Nearly-mandatory overreaction* pertains to when ‘policy-makers accurately estimate information regarding a positive event’ (Maor, 2012: 232). Accuracy often comes with the acceptance that the issue is highly contested.

Unintentional policy underreaction had four modes. *Directed underreaction* is where ‘policymakers accurately estimate increased risk but are predominantly influenced by intra-organisational sources of policy persistence’ (Maor, 2014a, 2014b: 431). In effect, policy makers make small incremental adjustments to the status quo in order to address (and appear to address) real concerns, but largely bow to pressures for policy continuity. Another is *forced underreaction* were ‘policymakers accurately estimate increased risk but view the policy at hand as primarily subject to external constraints’ (Maor, 2014a, 2014b: 431). Maor (2014a, 2014b) gives the example of Israel’s decision not to launch a pre-emptive strike just prior to the 1973 Yom Kippur War, based on the assumption that doing so would reduce the likelihood of US diplomatic and military support. Different again is *symbolic underreaction* ‘when policymakers underestimate increased risk (i.e., do not recognise the need for a policy change) and are predominantly influenced by internal sources for policy persistence’ (Maor, 2014a, 2014b: 432). One illustration is the US Security and Exchange Commission during the 2008 financial crisis. It underestimated the risk of a liquidity crisis and—in the face of internal issues of low morale and limited capacities—adopted an (ultimately) ineffectual voluntary programme rather than pursue more stringent options (Maor, 2014a, 2014b). There is also *no action*. This refers to circumstances where ‘policymakers underestimate increased risk and are predominantly influenced by external constraints’. Maor (2014a, 2014b) provides the example of the initial response of Swedish

authorities to the plight of some 30,000 Swedish nationals, affected by the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami. Officials did nothing initially, other than say that travel companies were best placed to deal with the issues of evacuation and medical treatment.

Intentional overreaction and underreaction refer to situations in which political executives deliberately overreact or underreact to achieve policy or political objectives. Maor bases his theoretically reasoning on the assumption of rationality (or at least bounded rationality), implying that political executives can objectively establish what constitutes a disproportionate response and may for various reasons deliberately decide to adopt such a response. Intentional policy overreaction can be rooted in effectiveness concerns, and may occur under ‘certain conditions under which policymakers may tend to develop effective response no matter what the costs are’ (Maor, 2017a: 390). Such situations are typically developing as a result of a threat or a crisis. Maor (2017a) uses the example national security threats as an illustration of circumstances in which policy makers may want to use excessive force to eliminate a threat. Similarly, there may be a strong preference for overreaction in a crisis in which there is a high degree of uncertainty about what it takes to solve it and an urgent need decisively to end the crisis. To illustrate overreaction in a crisis, Maor (2017a) uses the banking crisis in the US during the financial crisis of 2007–2008 where the US government enabled the Federal Reserve to lend freely. Political executives can also use policy overreaction as a signalling device to convey a message of their intentions in the event that particular developments happens, or do not happen. In this way, policy can have an impact despite not actually being implemented. Governing in the shadow of hierarchy is an illustrative example in which governments signal to industries that if they do not address a problem satisfactorily through self-regulation, state regulation will be imposed. Policy overreaction rooted in emotions and feelings can be considered a fourth type of intentional overreaction.

Underreaction may also be driven by policy concerns. In some situations, policy makers may underreact to a crisis even when there is a high degree of uncertainty. This happens when they ‘develop cost-conscious responses, with effectiveness considerations only secondary in importance if at all’ (Maor, 2017a, 2017b, 2017c: 390). Cost-conscious takes precedence over effectiveness when policy makers perceive that they could be blamed for the costs associated with overreaction (Howlett & Kemmerling, 2017). Climate change mitigation is used as the prime example of underreaction. It is argued that policy makers fear they may be blamed for spending huge sums to effectively address the challenge, but the benefits would only be visible in a distant future (Howlett & Kemmerling, 2017; Maor, 2017a; Peters et al., 2017).

More recent work by Maor highlights strategic political calculation as a driver of disproportionate policy making. This may happen when the aim of political executives is to inflict damage on political rivals or to shape public opinion in support of the government (Maor, 2021, see also 2019b). Intentional overreaction is considered a strategic act in which government attempts to claim credit and thus increase its chances of reelection ‘by pandering to voters’ opinions or their wish to signal extremity by overreacting to voters’ interests (i.e. anti-pandering) ...’. This is most likely to happen when political executives are better informed than voters (ibid.). Similarly, intentional strategic underreaction is also driven by strategic political calculation. As Maor argues (2021: 193),

the political logic that largely leads to deliberate policy underreaction is that some public policies are electorally dangerous because they entail difficult trade-offs involving the distribution of scarce public resources. In other words, political executives may be punished by voters shifting their support to viable alternatives ... This

political risk has an objective manifestation, but perhaps more important are perceptions regarding the risk of being punished

Two crucial assumptions lie at the heart of the Maor framework for disproportionate policy making. Both relate to how we can identify disproportionality, but they also reveal deeper and under-explored assumptions about what drives policy makers. Maor (2021) suggests various approaches to ‘measure’ disproportionality but does not spell them out or discuss their limitations. As we will discuss identifying (dis)proportionality raises some ontological issues which needs to be addressed.

First, the indications of disproportionality are a lack of fit between policy goals (ends) and the means of getting there, a missing balance between societal costs and benefits and imbalance between the severity of the problem and the intensity of policy instruments. Policy makers are assumed to develop relatively clear views on what they want to achieve in relation to addressing a policy problem. Further, they are assumed to be able to assess whether or not policy measures are disproportionate against some sort of objective standard though the disproportionality literature does not spell out how such an assessment takes place. Yet we know from multiple analyses across the realm of policy sciences that (dis)proportionality is difficult to ‘measure’ as it requires that policy measures can be assessed against an objective. Formal goals are not necessarily the definitive statement on policy intent. We know, for example, that policy may be driven by hidden agendas (such as to dampen the fervour around an issue or to position government in a pre-election period) (Edelman, 1977; McConnell, 2018b), cultivate ‘token’ appearance of action but in little more than a tokenistic way (Gustafsson, 1983; Stringer & Richardson, 1980), promote political self-interest and the enhancement of political capital (Althaus, 2008; Buller & James, 2012) and attempts via policy dismantling to ‘soften up’ policy sectors for radical reform (Bauer et al., 2012). In essence, the disproportionate policy framework is predicated on the assumption that policy is driven largely by formal policy goals, rather than being driven by inextricably linked and often latent policy and political perceptions. While Maor’s concept of intentional disproportionality does take political factors into consideration, he does not consider how they influence policy makers’ *perception* of whether or not policy responses are disproportionate. Policy makers are still assumed to be rational (or at least bounded rational) in their assessment of policy (dis)proportionality, but on the basis of a political calculation they may prefer to over- or underreact to achieve a political goal. As we argue below, *disproportionate responses may be deeper rooted as political persuasions influence people’s perception of which policy responses are proportionate and which aren’t.*

Second, a broader measure of disproportionality is societal costs exceeding the societal benefits of that policy. Notwithstanding the fact that the public value of policies isn’t always easy to capture. For instance, cultural growth and same-sex marriage are difficult to quantify. Maor gives little recognition to political outcomes being part of the cost vs. benefit calculation when establishing the proportionality of policy measures. The analysis is not devoid of such recognition and indeed his more recent work identifies cultivating public opinion as a factor that enters into the calculation of policy makers (Maor, 2019b, 2020, 2021) but political value—and the value of that politics to society as a whole—is not part of the calculation. Yet we know from the field of policy studies and in particular, examinations of political success (McConnell, 2010; Luetjens, Mintrom and’t Hart 2019) that political elites may benefit (and indeed lose) from policy interventions. They may introduce flagship initiatives that prove popular in particular amongst core constituencies of the governing parties or voter groups to which they want to appeal. Maor (2019b) would certainly

not disagree here, but he would consider this a calculated and deliberate act aimed at swaying public opinion, whereas we argue that such initiatives may be integral parts of governing and cannot be reduced to a political opinion shaping tool. Hence, in addition to affect public opinion, disproportionate policy initiatives may also be rooted in deeply entrenched political values justifying the provisions of benefits to constituencies which the governing parties consider valued and therefore deserving (Schneider & Ingram, 1993). The ongoing debate on exceptionalism in agricultural policy highlights this point. Most agricultural policies are underpinned by an idea, or belief, that the farm industry operates under production and market conditions which are unique to the industry and therefore cannot be left to the ‘invisible hand’ of the market. Therefore, farmers’ income deserves special attention by government. This has legitimised extensive farm income support programmes in developed countries and increasing so in emerging economies (Daugbjerg & Feindt, 2017; Skogstad, 1998). Further political drivers of policy making are desires to take initiatives that ease the business of governing by redefining difficult and even wicked issues making them manageable (McConnell, 2018a; Turnbull & Hoppe, 2019). They may also produce policies that contribute to their broader ideological visions, whether it is economic protectionism, free markets, or social democracy (Howlett, 2009). Furthermore, we might argue plausibly that allowing elected governments to pursue such matters, and for opponents to critique them, is part of the fabric of liberal democracy and contributes to its renewal. Difficult as it may be to do so, unless we factor in political values and value-based perceptions into any kind of formal or informal cost–benefit analysis, we have only a blunted understanding of whether policy is disproportionate or not. We find such deeper value-based foundations of policy making in much policy theory. They come under different labels, for instance as policy images in the punctuated equilibrium model (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993), core beliefs in the advocacy coalition framework (Sabatier, 1988), ideas and paradigms in the ideational policy literature and in the policy regime framework (Blyth, 2002; Hall, 1993; May & Jochim, 2013), values in the policy network literature (Rhodes & Marsh, 1992) and frames in the policy framing literature (Schön & Rein, 1994). Looking beyond policy theories to the broader institutionalist literature norms and worldviews are key concepts in explaining preferences, particularly within the historical and sociological institutionalist schools (see e.g. Hall and Taylor 1996 for an overview).

Bringing in proportionate politics

Why politics and programmes are inter-twinned

Definitions of public policy are many and, with a few exceptions, are given cursory treatment at the beginning of policy texts, chapters and articles, before moving on to ‘substantial’ issues. As a consequence, fundamental issues are often ignored. Howlett and Cashore (2020) in their discussion of Dye’s (2012:2) depiction of public policy as ‘whatever governments choose to do or not do’ make the point that for all its simplicity, his definition brings a certain clarity. In particular it emphasises that ‘... the primary agent of public-policy making is a government. This reinforces ... that private business decisions, decisions by charitable organizations, interest groups, other social groups or individuals are not in themselves public policies’ (Howlett & Cashore, 2020: 10). In a nutshell, governments *do* politics. It is intrinsic to what they do and what drives them, rather than being some kind of sideshow. There are many ways to define

and capture politics, but for the purposes of advancing our understanding of disproportionate policy making, we focus here on the elements of the policy success literature (McConnell, 2010; Luetjens, Mintrom and 't Hart, 2019; Compton & 't Hart, 2019;), which specifically addresses three types of political goals that policy/political elites may pursue during the business of producing policies.

The first is seeking via a policy initiative to protect and even enhance the reputation and political capital of government, and/or personal reputations and careers. Getting it 'right' can be a major boost. For instance, the German Chancellor Merkel's, whose legacy was considered in disarray after getting it wrong in relation to the European refugee crisis in 2015 and failed leadership succession in her party (Helms et al. 2019), rose in public recognition as a result of her competent handling of the first wave of the COVID-19 crisis. Getting it 'wrong' can effectively destroy political and even re-election chances. In early 2021 for example, Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte and the entire cabinet resigned over national tax authorities making false fraud allegations (particularly against ethnic minorities) in connection with childcare subsidies. Thousands of vulnerable families suffered, many torn apart and faced financial ruin.

The second is seeking to manage the business of governing via containable and stable policy agendas. Governments have limited agenda space and generally seek to avoid issues rebounding continually on agendas and consuming huge amounts of valuable time and resources as well as unwanted attention. As Jones and Baumgartner (2005: ix) argue, for governments overloaded with information and calls to action '... there are powerful psychological, political and institutional forces that support the prevailing arrangements are a resistant to new information'. As Cobb and Ross (1997) argue and Bachrach and Baratz (1970) before them, the role of agenda management lies at the heart of the business of governments and governing.

Third and finally, governments seek to promote ideas and visions, as well as a broad governing trajectory, whether it be social democracy, economic protections, free markets, or more specific trajectories around the relationship between the state, economy, civil society and policy production (e.g. co-production of public services), or around grand themes (new deals, green deals, democratic renewal etc.). Other than analytically, we cannot separate specific policy programmes from the broader ideologies of the governing regimes within which they operate (Howlett, 2009). For example, the huge reform agenda across multiple sectors from criminal justice to education and welfare reforms, pursued by the Blair Government in the UK, is inseparable from its New Labour, 'Third way' modernisation agendas (Ludlam & Smith, 2000).

Once we factor in the political dynamics of policy making, and consider them analytically to be just as important as quasi-rational problem-solving drivers, we lay the foundations for a more holistic approach to understanding disproportionality. Doing so involves addressing two key issues in particular: (i) disproportionality in relation to what? and (ii) a range of proportional and disproportional possibilities that encompasses the programme and political dimensions of policy. Addressing these two issues is not simply a technical exercise. It also helps capture the contestability of public policy problems and the most appropriate way forward, from hoaxes and problem denial to the core values underpinning them. In essence, disproportionate policy as Maor frames it (or disproportionate programmes, as we would frame it) can be *proportionate politics*, if there are political threats and political drivers at work.

Using problem/threat perception to link (dis)proportionality in programmes and politics

The very essence of politics is conflict. Whether the issue is conservationists vs. loggers, Trump supporters vs. critics or welfare state advocates vs anti-big government movements, political actors and protagonists will have differing views on whether government is ‘getting it right’, or whether its interventions are overkill or insufficient. The language of disproportionate outcomes is deeply embedded in the politics of whether or not governments are in ‘sync’ with the problems they face and societal perceptions of those problems. The alternative is that they are viewed as pursuing other agendas and issues that somehow are distorted and disproportional—exacerbating the gulf between government and governed, contributing to declining citizen trust and in politics and political processes. If we are unsympathetic to what government is doing as we do not share its values and visions, we are more liable to conceive of some programmes as driven by errors, illogical thinking or other pathologies that do not sit well with our views. By contrast if we are supportive because we share the government’s visions or problem perceptions, we will be more inclined to see the response as driven by plausible and proportionate logic.

Figure 1 helps us navigate such differences in political values and how they influence perceptions of (dis)proportionality by rooting the analysis in the degree to which actors perceive a policy problem or threat to be ‘real’, or a political construction manufactured by critics, to the point that it is marginal, unimportant or even a ‘fake’ problem. For example, if we take the perspective of someone whose perception is that a threat is inviolably real (such as a pandemic or climate change), then the logic is that we need a measured response, i.e. a proportional reaction to that problem. Anything short of this would be policy underreaction, driven by issue suppression or denial rather the ‘problem’ logic. Yet such assumptions of disproportionality are not ontologically fixed, as if policy underreaction simply ‘is’. At the other end of the spectrum, there are those who see problems/threats (such as climate change, or deforestation) as of little importance or even fabricated

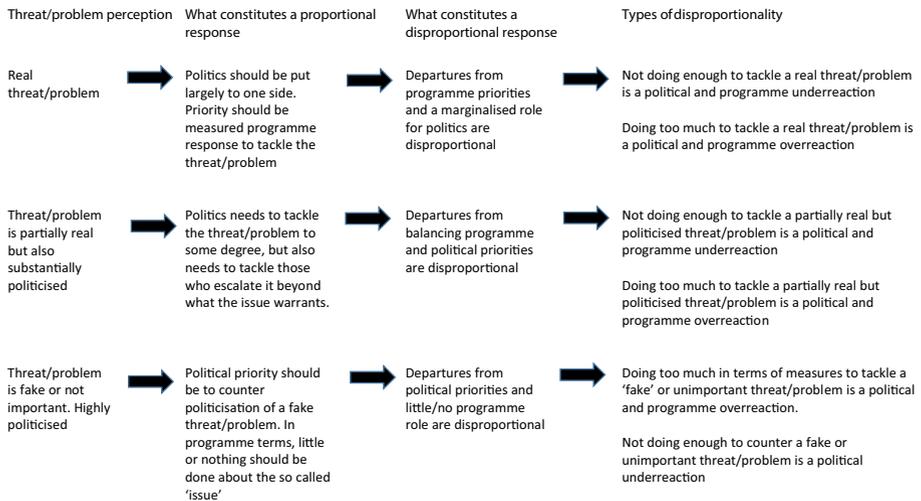


Fig. 1 Using Problem/Threat Positioning to Link Assumptions About Disproportional Programmes and Disproportional Politics

by political opponents. The logic, therefore, is that a proportional response to a ‘non-problem’ means not tackling it in programme terms, although perhaps tackling it politically by criticising those who promote the issues as real, evidence-based, science-based and so on. Introducing substantive reforms to tackle a ‘non-problem’ would be perceived as a policy overreaction.

For purposes of analysis, we need to be able to interrogate claims of disproportionality and recognise that—dependent on political views—they may be considered proportionate politics. It is typified for example in long-running disputes over welfare states. Social activist groups emphasise the ‘real’ threats to lives and livelihoods from the barbarism of market capitalism and that anything short of a massive upgrading of benefit levels and support is underreaction, i.e. programmatically ‘on the ground’, and politically in terms of lack of political will. For some free market proponents, however, such threats are hyped-up by the political left. The real threats are governments being trapped in financial debt and unsustainable political expectations while presiding over programmes that are masking both welfare dependency and corruption. Any support for such ‘nanny states’ would be considered across-the-board overreactions to an over-hyped welfare threat, but also underreactions to the ‘real threat’ of political and economic sustainability.

Proportionality and disproportionality: a range of possibilities

While our own sympathies are much more with evidence-based approaches, our purpose here is to advance analysis of policy rather than advance a particular normative view. Therefore, we do not offer a definitive understanding of what is disproportionate policy making because to do so falls into the trap of privileging certain values and eschewing others. Instead we seek to help others understand disproportionality claims, by highlighting the possibility that there are other possible and plausible perspectives on disproportionality when factoring in political values. Hence supposed disproportionality can be perceived as perfectly proportional in other respects, and in recognising the role of political values as crucial for how people perceive of disproportionality we aid our understanding of policy dynamics, rather than assuming that politics happens on the sidelines of policy.

Table 1, which builds on Fig. 1, splits policy into programme and political dimensions, and so there are nine possible positions in total. One is across-the-board programme and political proportionality (position 5), and the remaining eight are various combinations of underreaction, overreaction and proportionality. Several issues are worth highlighting to help us read and interpret Table 1.

The disproportionate policy thesis of Maor adopts three main types of positions, i.e. policy underreaction, policy overreaction and policy proportionality. Each position is treated quasi-objectively, with its existence determined by the degree of fit (or not) between policy goals and the means of getting there, as well as the balance of benefits/costs to society as a whole. Yet as depicted in Table 1, there exists more complex and nuanced analytical perspectives on (dis)proportionality. We cannot slot Maor’s thesis into any particular boxes of our table, simply because each of our possibilities has an explicit sub-position for politics. Nevertheless, there is a general tendency in the disproportionate policy thesis to either *implicitly*, or occasionally explicitly, read off from disproportionate policy making that it is a product of ‘outside’ disproportionate political influences as outlined by the concept of intentional disproportionality. For us, and in analytically terms, political perceptions and programme goals are intermeshed, and therefore Table 1 offers considerable nuance and a more holistic approach. It could be argued that positions 1 and 9 resemble an intentional

Table 1 Programmes and Politics: Mapping A Range of Proportional and Disproportional Possibilities

Positioning the Programmatic Dimension		Underreaction	Proportional reaction	Overreaction
Positioning the Political Dimension	Underreaction	<p>Position 1: Politically Blind Government Pursuing Inadequate Policies</p> <p>Example <i>Political underreaction:</i> Government considered not sufficiently attentive to credible evidence of a major pandemic because of excessive focus on preserving political reputation/agendas/ideas</p> <p><i>Programme underreaction:</i> Government perceived as not doing enough to prevent escalation of pandemic cases and deaths</p>	<p>Position 2: Lack of Appropriate Political Problem Recognition, Masking Strong, Reasonable Measures</p> <p>Example <i>Political underreaction:</i> Despite credible science on consequences of climate change, government perceived as engaging in climate change denial with its argument that climate mitigation is a threat to economic growth and the existing way of life</p> <p><i>Programme proportionality:</i> Measures and targets to address climate threats are viewed as more seriously focused than government admits publicly</p>	<p>Position 3: Government Playing Down Issues but Pursuing Draconian Policies</p> <p>Example <i>Political underreaction:</i> In face of credible domestic terrorist threat, government is judged as downplaying them in order to allay citizen fears</p> <p><i>Programme overreaction:</i> Despite publicly playing down terrorist threats, government is accused of introducing draconian and intrusive surveillance measures</p>
	Proportional reaction	<p>Position 4: Reasonable Political Recognition of Problem but Insufficient Action on the Policy Problem</p> <p>Example <i>Political proportionality:</i> Government perceived as recognising problems of attracting workers to regional labour markets but also perceived as seeking to balance the issue against its other agenda priorities</p> <p><i>Programme underreaction:</i> Funding incentives viewed as partially successful in attracting workers to regional areas, but also viewed as insufficient to address deeper barriers such as lack of easy access to high quality healthcare</p>	<p>Position 5: Proportional Response Across the Board</p> <p>Example <i>Political proportionality:</i> Government is perceived as ‘doing the right thing’ politically because it is aware that a series of food contamination episodes in supply chains need be addressed but also aware of need to insulate government reputation, agendas and trajectory as much as possible</p> <p><i>Programme proportionality:</i> Regulatory measures to address food contamination in supply chains are judged as focused and appropriate</p>	<p>Position 6: Reasonable Political Framing but ‘Going Too Far’ on Policies</p> <p>Example <i>Political proportionality:</i> Acknowledgment of government recognising that a series of media investigations into the private/public lives of elected members has generated scandals that are a threat to its reputation, agendas and trajectories</p> <p><i>Programme overreaction:</i> Government accused nevertheless of resorting to tighter media regulation than is necessary, as opposed to addressing the behaviour of its elected members</p>

Table 1 (continued)

Positioning the Programmatic Dimension		
Overreaction	Underreaction	Overreaction
<p>Position 7: Hyperactive Politics Marginalises Possibility of Effective Policy Response</p> <p>Example <i>Political overreaction:</i> Government perceived as overinterpreting and exploiting crime statistics in order to advance its law and order agenda <i>Programme underreaction:</i> Government, despite its rhetoric, is judged as not doing enough to ensure safer local communities</p>	<p>Position 8: Overzealous Politics Masking a More Measured Policy Response</p> <p>Example <i>Political overreaction:</i> Government accused of inflated public rhetoric with major trade partner by its use of the language of full-blown ‘trade war’ <i>Programme proportionality:</i> Measures to address trade issues are judged as more diplomatic and relevant than suggested by government rhetoric</p>	<p>Position 9: Overkill Politics and Overkill Policies</p> <p>Example <i>Political overreaction:</i> Government judged as going too far by exploiting budget deficit to fuel a broader ‘anti big government’ ideological agenda <i>Programme overreaction:</i> Government judged as pursuing much harsher cutbacks and austerity measures than is necessary to address the deficit</p>

disproportionality perspective as political intentions and programmatic responses are aligned. This is true in situations in which government deliberately frames a problem or crisis more or less severe than it believes it actually is in order to pave the way for disproportionate programmatic response which serves some sort of political objective. However, we argue that what may appear as a disproportionate political framing from the observer's perspective may well reflect government's perception of the situation given its values and ideological perspective. In such instances, government believes its understanding of the problem is politically proportionate and policy responses aligning with its problem perception are proportionate both in political and programmatic terms. Limitations of space prohibit us from providing a detailed examination of each position in the table but we do offer an overview of programmatic underreaction and programmatic overreaction.

The most basic position of *programmatic underreaction*—a judgement that government is not doing enough to tackle a policy problem—is contained in Position 1 where political rhetoric is dismissive of a problem as it does not perceive it as an issue that requires government intervention. A typical example would be that government isn't doing enough to tackle the spread of a pandemic virus and its political language is dismissive of the threat because it does not perceive it as a severe threat to public health—just a flu. Yet there are other possibilities. Position 4 also judges that government response to a policy problem is woeful (programme underreaction), but recognises a policy problem or threat and is 'talking a good game', i.e. proportional politics. Continuing with the pandemic example, the framing here is that government isn't doing enough to tackle the spread of a pandemic, despite its political rhetoric which appears to treat it seriously (this is akin to the argument of Edelman (1977) when he wrote about 'words that succeed and policies that fail'). Position 7 takes the issue of programme underreaction even further, by recognising the possibility, though probably relatively rare, that while government still isn't doing enough to address an issue (programme underreaction), it is engaging in hyper-partisan, exploitative politics as a reflection of its ideological perspective on an issue and its political agenda (political overreaction). The work by Boin (2009) on crisis exploitation helps capture political attempts to capitalise on policy issues, even though these issues may not be addressed successfully at all.

Similarly, the most basic position of *programmatic overreaction*—a judgement that government is engaging in overkill to tackle a policy problem—is contained in Position 9 where government's values and ideological perspective result in a particular framing of the problem and political rhetoric that is perceived as overkill and results in policy overreaction. A simple example would be government introducing draconian budget cuts and austerity measures in the face of a relatively routine budget deficit (programme overreaction), while also hyping up the 'fear factor' of the nation going bankrupt (political rhetoric). The rhetoric is rooted in neo-liberal beliefs and an anti-big government ideological agenda. Position 6 also involves overkill in terms of tackling the policy problem itself, but government is more nuanced in recognising the nature of the problem, perhaps resembling the prevailing international framing of the problem. As a result, its rhetoric may in fact be quite reasonable (proportional politics). Position 3 takes the issue further with the view that measures to tackle a policy problem have gone 'too far' (programmatic overreaction). In this situation, government perceives the problem as being very serious but wants to play down the issue and dampening citizen perception of risks (political underreaction).

Finally, *programmatic proportionality* is not necessarily caused by a political desire to pursue proportionate policy. In position 2, government is convinced that a problem is not severe but pursues proportionate policies, for instance to maintain its international reputation. Position 8 involves overzealous political reaction, indicated by inflated rhetoric. It

reflects that an issue is considered a serious threat but not matched by corresponding policy overreaction. Rather, proportionate measures are adopted.

Broader implications

Our analysis goes deeper than being a simply critique of the literature on disproportionate policy making. It is also a critique of its underlying assumptions about the nature of society and public policy itself, as well as the dynamics therein.

Disproportionate policy can be understood as proportionate politics—NOT an aberration: The language of disproportionate policy making assumes in an explanatory sense, something is amiss in the policy process. It assumes, in essence, there is such a thing as ‘normal’, proportional policy making, until it comes to disproportionate policy making. In fact, we contend that much of alleged disproportionate policy can in fact be considered proportional politics. In other words, it is driven to some degree by attempts (even if they are based on flawed assumptions or ended badly) to shore up and manage crowded policy agendas, shore up political capital and promote broader ideological and governing agendas. Such issues are routine facets of public policy processes and the business of government and government.

Disproportionality is contingent primarily on our values and NOT an indisputable fact: The language of disproportionate policy is the language of framing, but we all know that the way in which an issue is understood and expressed can depend on individual perceptions, values, degree to which they have a stake in an issue and so on. Perceiving of the coronavirus as hoax or conspiracy inevitably leads to the assumption that any policy/political response that treats it seriously is overreaction. Equally, for those who believe policy and political responses should be driven by the science and listening to the experts, governments inclined to dismiss the potential impact or even existence of the problem will have underreacted. Disproportionality is a normative frame, a lens through which to view policy, rather than an indisputable fact.

Politics is part of the fabric of public policy—NOT a disproportionate outsider: The literature on disproportionate policy making tends to equate policy with programmes, and anything to do with politics is something outside the realm of policy. But as Howlett and Cashore (2020) argue, ‘public policy’ has multiple aspects to it, all rooted in what ‘governments choose to do or not to do’. If we conceive of governments only ‘doing’ programmes, we become blind to ‘doing politics’ and blind to many of the drivers of policy and policy processes—albeit latent through hidden agendas, and policies driven more by symbolism and political imperatives (Althaus, 2008; McConnell, 2018b; Stringer & Richardson, 1980). Once we expand our horizons to governments ‘doing politics’ as one of the many things they choose to do or not to do, we are able to conceive of policy as partly driven by an attempt to advance goals based on political values and perspectives (political proportionality), rather than assuming that such episodes embody the aberrations of disproportionate policy.

Disproportionality for whom, in what way and in what circumstances—NOT a benefit/cost calculation: The language and argument of the disproportional policy making thesis, is that disproportional policy making is defined relative to positive societal trajectories, which in themselves are assumed to be when benefits exceed costs. Disproportional policy making, therefore, is generally assumed to stack up as a ‘negative’ in the balance sheet, and the product of pathologies such as errors, omissions and (in more recent research) strategic

calculation around catering to voters. In this respect, it is important to keep in mind that the electorate consists of different constituencies which have different perceptions of what would be a proportionate policy response and what would not. In some situations, the negative tone is relaxed, for instance when governments overreact to solve a problem once and for all. Yet all policy scholars know that policy rights, rewards, outcomes and more, are variable, unevenly distributed, messy and contested. All societies are characterised by inequalities of income, wealth, differential access to power and so on. To equate society being ‘right track’ when proportional policy is pursued and on the wrong track when disproportional policy making occurs, is to deny the negative impact that proportional policy making can have on individuals, groups, interests and so on. For instance, the measures used for COVID-19 infection tracking can be considered proportionate given the severity of the situation, but all the data collected and stored on individual citizens can have disproportionately negative impacts on individuals if used for purposes other than infection tracking. Overall, the disproportional policy making thesis has a rather rose-tinted view of proportional policy making and a darker view of disproportional policy making.

Overall, we would argue that the disproportionate policy making thesis, advanced particularly by Maor, has been highly valuable in helping capture the mood of contemporary commentary and critiques of policy makers, often facing accusation that are pursuing lines of policy inquiry that are ‘out of kilter’ with what’s needed, either in the sense of being underwhelming and lacking due gravitas/concern, or the opposite—knee jerk overreactions that do not align with the more modest problems they face. Yet by rooting its analysis in normative assumptions of ‘good societies’ that occasionally produce disproportionate policies, the thesis fails to capture the contestable nature of societies, differential perception around what might be disproportionate, and the more politicised driving forces that are embedded routinely within policy processes.

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