What do you mean by 'infeasible?' An exploration of feasibility in policymaking

TYLER WILLIAMS

Abstract

We often hear policy proposals dismissed on grounds of infeasibility, but what do we actually mean when we call something 'infeasible?' Is feasibility simply a matter of what's possible? Should we consider policies as categorically feasible or infeasible, or rather more feasible and less feasible, relative to one another? Is it feasible for a nation to achieve economic stability by opening mines, which randomly strike an abundance of gold? In this essay, I aim to answer these questions, and provide a definitive framework of feasibility to be used in the assessment of government policies. Three main frameworks of feasibility will be explored—the PA (possibility account), SPA (simple probability account), and CPA (conditional probability account). I will conclude that the CPA is the strongest of these and should be put to use when deliberating policies. Furthermore, I will assert that instead of categorising actions and thus policies as simply 'feasible' or 'infeasible', they must be categorised as more or less 'feasible' in relation to one another.

Introduction

Considerations of feasibility are thought to be integral to policymaking, as they balance fanciful philosophical ideals with the practical constraints of implementing these ideals (Brennan, 2013). This is especially important in an age of climate concerns, as environmental policies which seem desirable may be largely infeasible (Jewell & Cherp, 2019; Nielsen et al., 2020). However, exactly how we should conceptualise the feasibility of a policy is widely disputed, as it is not entirely clear exactly what is meant by the term 'feasible'. Intuitively, it may be thought that for something to be feasible it must simply be possible. However, as Southwood and Wiens (2016) point out, this leads to some unintuitive conclusions regarding policymaking: for example that it is feasible to eliminate violent crime by implementing a policy that 'people will be nicer to one another', as this is technically possible, despite being very unlikely. Contrarily, Brennan and Southwood (2007) argue that for a policy to be feasible, it must be not only possible but likely to occur. However, there are some policies which are unlikely to occur and yet still seem feasible. For example, it seems unlikely the Australian government would ban sport, yet if they truly tried to, they probably could, making it seem feasible for the Australian government to ban sport. This implies there is an element of intention or 'trying' when we use the word 'feasible'. In other words, for an action to be feasible, it must be likely, assuming the agent is trying to perform said action. Hence, the main thesis of this essay will be that feasibility should be conceived as follows: an action is highly feasible if is likely to occur, assuming the agent tries to perform it. Furthermore, I will argue that actions are best conceived in degrees as more or less feasible, rather than categorically feasible or infeasible.

In this essay, I will elucidate three accounts of feasibility: the *possibility account* (PA), the *simple probability account* (SPA), and the *conditional probability account* (CPA). The first of these, the PA, states that for a policy to be feasible, it must be possible. I will argue that this is a necessary condition for feasibility, but it is not sufficient, and hence the PA is an incomplete theory. Secondly, the SPA states that a policy must not only be possible, but also probable, to be classed as feasible. If the SPA were correct, then policies which states simply do not want to implement would be deemed infeasible, which seems counterintuitive. The third account, the CPA, resolves this, stating that for a policy to be feasible, it must

be reasonably likely to occur, assuming the state tries their hardest to implement it. I will then outline the 'can't try' objection to the CPA; the argument that if an agent cannot try, it is infeasible for them to do something, which contradicts the conclusion of the CPA. I propose that the CPA can successfully overcome this, by arguing that if an agent truly cannot try, then this qualifies as a *hard constraint*—a constraint which makes an action totally infeasible. The CPA has a further advantage over its competitors in that it provides an intuitive distinction between desirability and feasibility. It may be objected, however, that desirability and feasibility cannot be disentangled so easily. I argue this objection incorrectly conflates desires of an agent with desires of non-agents, and hence is not problematic for the CPA. I conclude that since the CPA adequately answers these objections, it is the best way to conceive of the feasibility of a policy proposal. But before I begin, I must emphasise that I will include a plethora of examples in my discussion, some of which are directly related to policy, while others are not. These non-policy examples will function to provide clear-cut examples for the sake of clarity but will then be extrapolated to be more specific to policymaking.

The possibility account (PA)

To begin, I will outline one possible account of political feasibility: the *possibility account.* A proponent of this view would argue, reasonably straightforwardly, that feasibility should be understood in terms of what is possible (Southwood & Wiens, 2016). To characterise exactly what is possible and impossible, I must introduce the notion of *hard constraints.* Hard constraints are defined as any constraint which is not malleable depending on circumstances (Gilabert & Lawford-Smith, 2012). For instance, two plus two cannot equal five, and people cannot levitate, regardless of when or where they are. Circumstances refers to a broad category of factors, including location, political stability, economic situation, and so forth. Usually, hard constraints will be physical or logical, but they do not need to be, so long as they prevent an action from occurring in any context. This applies equally to policy: we cannot have a policy that all carbon emissions should simply disappear from the universe, since the laws of physics disallows it regardless of circumstances. It does not matter if this policy is proposed now or one hundred years ago, or if it is proposed in Australia or the United States, it simply cannot occur. Hence, feasibility is categorised as follows:

> *The PA:* It is feasible for agent A to perform x if it is not incompatible with any hard constraint (Gilabert & Lawford-Smith, 2012).

Under the PA, all previous examples would be categorised as infeasible, and this seems to be the correct conclusion. Hence if a policy proposal is incompatible with a hard constraint, it is impossible, and accordingly, infeasible.

However, while the possibility account constitutes a necessary condition for something to be feasible, it is not a sufficient condition. Under the possibility account, anything which is not restricted by a hard constraint would be categorised as feasible, but this simply does not seem to be the case. Consider the case of a hypothetical country C, which is in a serious economic crisis, with catastrophic growth rates and starving citizens. The government of country C decides to introduce a policy whereby mines will be opened in order to strike gold and save the country from economic collapse. Should we say it is feasible for country C to achieve economic stability by striking gold? The possibility account would conclude that it is. After all, striking gold is not incompatible with any hard constraint (Southwood, 2016). However, intuitively most would say it is infeasible for country C to simply opt to strike gold. This is because despite it being possible, it is extremely improbable, and country C has no control over the outcome. Accordingly, it seems that feasibility is contingent on more than simple possibility, and something having no hard constraints is not sufficient to categories it as feasible. Hence, the possibility account, while necessary, is not a complete account of political feasibility.

The simple probability-based account (SPA)

As I have stated, it seems that a policy passing the binary test is not sufficient to categorise it as feasible, since it may be extremely unlikely. A possible solution to this is to adopt the *simple probability account* of feasibility. The simple probability account characterises feasibility as the following:

> *The SPA:* It is feasible for agent A to perform x action if and only if and because A is reasonably likely to perform x (Brennan & Southwood, 2007).

This account resolves the issue of country C striking gold, as it is not reasonably likely that this occurs, and hence is infeasible. However, I do not think it is entirely accurate to categorise country C's action as infeasible. It is certainly not infeasible in the same way as levitating, or two plus two equalling five. In my view the simple probability account should be somewhat modified, so that instead of actions being classed as feasible or infeasible they should be categorised as less feasible or more feasible (Cohen, 2007). This is to say that feasibility should be conceived in degrees. This idea could be devised as follows:

> *The SPA*$_2$: It is more feasible for agent A to perform x action than for A to perform y action if and only if and because it is more probable for A to perform x than y.

With this wording, we can categorise country C striking gold as less feasible, rather than simply infeasible. This seems to be compatible with everyday speech about feasibility—we would say it is more feasible for country C to strike oil (a more abundant resource) than gold. This model is also useful from a policy perspective, as it seems easier to compare the feasibility of one policy to another, when they are conceived as more or less feasible than one another.

How then, do we determine the probability of an action? To answer this, I must introduce the notion of *soft constraints*. Soft constraints, contrary to hard constraints, do not make an action categorically impossible, instead they make it less probable, and they may vary depending on context (Gilabert & Lawford-Smith, 2012). They may be cultural, economic, technological, or any other kind of constraint which does not apply in all contexts. For instance, it is difficult, though not impossible, to ban guns in the United States, since many of its citizens are adamantly pro-guns. This cultural attitude constitutes a soft constraint on the policy of banning guns in the US. Conversely, Australians have less strong attitudes about guns, and hence a much weaker soft constraint. Accordingly, banning guns in Australia is more feasible than doing so in the US.

Initially, the SPA seems to provide the right answers in many cases. Presumably, if the Australian government implemented a policy which decreed that the number of pupils in a high school class should triple, it would be very poorly received by the population, and hence quite infeasible. However, there are some cases where the SPA provides dubious answers. Consider the US continuous bombing of the Middle East (Brennan & Southwood, 2007). The US government has the option of ceasing to bomb the Middle East at any point and has had this option for decades. For whatever reason, the US has chosen to continue its attacks, and it seems unlikely it will stop at any point in the near future. In other words, the probability of the US ceasing bombing in the Middle East is extremely low, meaning under the SPA, we would classify it as highly infeasible. Yet, it seems obviously feasible for the US to cease bombing. There are no obvious military or economic factors making it necessary for them to do so, and if they wanted to, they could simply stop. Since the SPA arrives at a very counterintuitive conclusion, it seems also to be an incomplete account of political feasibility.

The conditional probability-based account (CPA)

When we talk about what is feasible for an agent, we seem to be talking about what an agent *can* do, not what they *want* to do. This is why we deem it highly feasible for the US to cease bombing of the Middle East—because even though they don't, they *can* (Gilabert & Lawford-Smith, 2012). This principle is obvious in other, hypothetical policies—just because a country won't donate 5 per cent of its budget to

foreign aid does not make it infeasible for them to do so (Estlund, 2011). As such, an accurate account of feasibility must explain why it is feasible for an agent to do something, despite them not *doing* so. To solve this problem, I present the final account of feasibility, which I believe to be the best conception of political feasibility: the *conditional probability account* (CPA). The CPA states that feasibility should be conceived as follows:

> *The CPA:* It is more feasible for agent A to perform x action than y action if and only if it is more probable for A to perform x than y, AND A tries their hardest and does not give up.

The added caveat of 'trying' establishes the assumption that agents can try, and feasibility is determined by the likelihood of them succeeding, given they try. This produces the right outcome in the aforementioned cases: It is highly feasible for the US to cease bombing in the Middle East if they try and do not give up, and it is highly feasible for a government to donate 5 per cent of their budget to foreign aid if they try and do not give up. Accordingly, I believe the CPA provides the most consistent and accurate account of political feasibility.

The 'can't try' objection

However, what about in cases where an agent *can't* try? I have based my account of feasibility on the presupposition that agents 'try their hardest', but how should I deal with agents who literally cannot try? To illustrate this point, Nic Southwood proposes the case of Alarice. Alarice is an extremely talented pianist who has the technical skills to play any piece of music with ease (Southwood, 2022). However, she never plays the song *Chopsticks*, because she associates *Chopsticks* with an unspeakably traumatic event from her youth. Alarice has a pathological aversion to *Chopsticks* which is so strong that the mere thought of playing it strikes fear into her heart. Alarice then, cannot even try to play *Chopsticks*, because her psychology will not allow her to. Despite this, if she were to try, given her incredible talent, she would easily succeed. Most would conclude that it is infeasible for Alarice to play *Chopsticks* due to her psychological aversion. Under the CPA however, it is perfectly feasible for Alarice to play *Chopsticks*, contradicting our intuitions. David Estlund points out that this is relevant in the context of groups, and hence for policy: if any individual within the group cannot perform a certain action needed for a certain outcome, then that outcome is infeasible (Estlund, 2011). One could imagine, for instance, a policy which required country C to cull 30 per cent of the population in order to stop climate change. This may be possible if the government of country C tried their hardest, but perhaps the individuals within the government cannot bring themselves to even try to perform such an act. As such, this constitutes a serious objection to the CPA as an account of political feasibility.

I believe the CPA has an adequate defence to this objection. I will argue that if an agent truly cannot try in any context, then this constitutes a *hard constraint* on that outcome. Previously I defined hard constraints as any constraint which is not malleable depending on circumstances. In country C's case, it is asserted that the individuals within the government cannot even try to commit mass genocide, as they have a psychological aversion to doing so. If this is true of them in any context, then we can classify this psychological aversion as a hard constraint (Gilabert & Lawford-Smith, 2012). If this psychological aversion persists in any thinkable circumstance, then we can say it constitutes a hard constraint, and it is infeasible for country C to cull 30 per cent of their population. Some may object that there are conceivable circumstances wherein country C could cull 30 per cent of their population—for instance, if the members of its government were unempathetic psychopaths, or if they underwent complex neurosurgery which removed all sense of empathy. However, the question is whether those currently in government can implement a policy now. If we followed the aforementioned logic, we would be led to conclude that it is feasible for Australia to reverse the effects of climate change with some complex, not-yet-invented piece of technology, since that may be feasible in the future. However, it seems clear that when we talk about the feasibility of a policy, it is implicit we mean its feasibility *now*, and with the current individuals who are in government. Hence, it seems that a psychological aversion to mass genocide does, or at least could, constitute a *hard constraint* and would be deemed infeasible under the CPA. Hence, the CPA can adequately

accommodate the 'can't try' argument and will provide the right answer in the case of Alarice, and in the case of a government committing mass genocide.

Desirability and feasibility

A further advantage of the CPA is that it treats desirability and feasibility as largely independent, which seems to align with our intuitive conception of feasibility (Southwood, 2019). Something desirable may be extremely improbable, and hence very infeasible under the CPA, or vice versa. Consider a government which implements a policy to exterminate all pet guinea pigs. This is clearly undesirable but very feasible, and, importantly, the fact that it is undesirable does not make it infeasible. In contrast, the SPA would conclude that the extermination of guinea pigs is infeasible, since it is unlikely to occur in virtue of its undesirability, which seems unintuitive. Moreover, it seems consistent for two people to disagree about the desirability of a policy, while agreeing about its feasibility, further indicating two are independent. Initially, it seems as if desirability and feasibility are obviously distinct concepts, and that this is a clear advantage of the CPA.

However, it is sometimes objected that desirability and feasibility cannot be cleanly distinguished in this manner, and the feasibility of a policy is in part constituted by its desirability (Raikka, 1998; see also Miller, 2008). It certainly seems true that there is an inescapable feedback loop between desirability and feasibility. If a policy is desirable, it becomes more feasible as people will work harder towards it, and if it is feasible, people will desire it more, since it will be easier to bring about (Gilabert & Lawford-Smith, 2012). Hence, it would be asserted that the concepts of feasibility and desirability cannot be disentangled from one another in the way required for the CPA to be cohesive. To respond to this objection, I will emphasise the distinction between how desirable a policy is to government from how desirable it is to citizens, and feasibility is only impacted by the latter. A government may desire to fund oil fracking, and ignore the associated environmental degradation, while the citizens may desire that the government preserves the environment. As I have established, it is irrelevant whether the agent (in this case the government) desires fracking or not, because it is presumed that they 'try their hardest and do not give up'. Conversely, the desirability of a policy according to citizens may factor into feasibility since they can protest or vote against fracking. As such, desirability to citizens constitutes a soft constraint on feasibility, since it reduces the probability of a policy being successful, but not desirability of a government (Gilabert & Lawford-Smith, 2012). This is not problematic at all for the CPA, since the CPA can incorporate the attitudes of citizens as a soft constraint when determining the probability of a policy proposal.

Practical applications of the CPA

The CPA, if correct, has two main practical applications: firstly, it allows policymakers to compare potential policies within a given country to one another, and evaluate which is more feasible. Secondly, it allows policymakers to examine (un)successful policies from other countries and compare the relevant soft constraints between that country and their own, hence determining whether a foreign policy could be useful for their own policymaking. In the first instance, a policymaker may have one goal in mind—for example, to reduce environmental degradation, and compare the following three policies: (i) to put harsher restrictions on factory farming, (ii) to introduce a broad carbon tax, or (iii) to implement nuclear energy more widely. A policymaker could then evaluate the relevant soft constraints, such as cultural attitudes towards nuclear energy and meat eating, the economic impact of a carbon tax and nuclear energy, and accurately rank these three policies based on their feasibility. Secondly, the CPA also allows a given government to compare policies which have succeeded or failed in other countries and evaluate more accurately whether they would succeed or fail in their own. For instance, the policy of high taxes and welfare has been tremendously successful in Sweden (Svallfors, 2011). This may be accredited to more positive cultural attitudes towards taxation, constituting a lesser soft constraint than in other countries, such as the US, which has very negative cultural attitudes towards higher taxation. Hence, a policymaker may

conclude that such a policy would succeed in Sweden, but not in the US, given the relevant hard constraints, and discard it as a policy option for the US. Accordingly, the CPA has real practical application and value in a policymaking setting and should be used as a guide to determine the feasibility of different policies.

Conclusion

To conclude, I believe the CPA is the best way to conceive of the feasibility of a policy proposal, and that it provides a useful tool to compare the feasibility of multiple policies. The CPA can adequately overcome the challenges of the PA, as it provides a more complete framework of feasibility, which accounts for very improbable policy proposals. Furthermore, the CPA is conditional upon trying, meaning it produces the correct result in cases where an agent 'won't try'. The CPA also produced the correct results in cases where an agent 'can't try', by construing 'can't try' as a hard constraint on feasibility. Furthermore, the CPA is intuitive insofar as it treats desirability and feasibility as conceptually independent. As the CPA can adequately overcome all the above objections, I believe the CPA is the best and most accurate conception of the feasibility of a policy proposal.

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