Blame, Reputation and Organizational Responses to a Politicized Climate

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When it comes to exploring the interplay of various political phenomena and public service delivery, scholars of politics and public administration often sit 'at separate tables' (Almond, 1988). Scholars studying Western politics strive to keep track of the newest political developments, such as polarization or populism, but often employ an overly narrow understanding of 'policy' (Hacker & Pierson, 2014). Concurrently, scholars that study public service delivery in Western democracies are well aware of political pressures but often struggle to incorporate current political developments, such as the marketization of public services and their impacts on public service delivery, in their research (Thomann, Hupe & Sager, 2017). We suggest that both strands of research can profit from occasionally reaching across tables. To contribute to this discussion, this chapter explores how public sector organizations (PSOs) react to elite polarization, which is an increasingly common phenomenon in many Western democracies. For this purpose, this chapter conceptualizes a mechanism that depicts the path leading from elite polarization to PSOs' prioritization of tasks.

Elite Polarization and Public Service Delivery

Many Western democracies are experiencing increased levels of elite polarization (Hetherington, 2009; Kriesi et al., 2012). Elite polarization is a political situation that is marked by a growing ideological divide between political opponents, more extreme policy positions and, accordingly, fewer opportunities for compromise (Hetherington, 2009; Layman, Carsey & Horowitz, 2006). In a polarized political system, political elites increasingly engage in generating blame, negative messaging or scandalizing (Flinders, 2014; Layman, Carsey & Horowitz, 2006; Nai & Walter, 2015; Weaver, 2013). The adoption of such strategies represents a rational response to a change in contextual conditions, since they appear more credible and thus promise higher electoral payoff in light of a gridlocked political system (Parsons, 2007; Weaver, 2013).

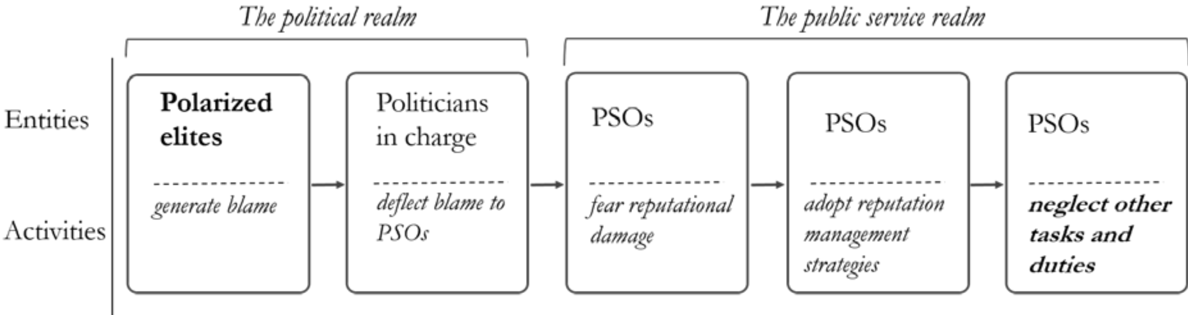
The research examining the implications of elite polarization for public service delivery is extensive but limited in its scope. The existing studies mostly focus on the political arena in which political conflicts over policy unfold, new policies are crafted and existing policies are changed (Barber & McCarty, 2015; Layman, Carsey & Horowitz, 2006). Unfortunately, this research direction means that changes to public service delivery that transcend or bypass formal policy change remain unstudied. This is problematic since policies can change in a myriad of, often gradual and piecemeal, ways – even in the absence of 'big legislative changes' (Hacker & Pierson, 2014, p. 644; Mahoney & Thelen, 2010).

In this chapter, we discuss a particular implication of elite polarization for public service delivery. PSOs, such as regulatory agencies, local government units, and executive departments and ministries, are tasked with the application of policies and regulations in concrete cases. While they must fulfil their formal mandates, many of these organizations enjoy considerable discretion and autonomy in their daily operations (Bækkeskov, 2016). Based on this insight, we

aim to show how elite polarization influences the daily actions of PSOs and can thus have an effect on public service delivery that is independent of formal policy change.

For this purpose, we conceptualize a mechanism that leads from elite polarization to PSOs' prioritization of tasks (Figure 1). The multiple steps that connect elite polarization to task prioritization can be conceptualized as entities engaging in activities, where the activities are causal forces that lead from one step to the next (Beach & Pedersen, 2013). The mechanism begins in the political realm, where polarized political elites generate increased levels of blame. The politicians in charge shift a significant share of this blame 'downwards' to PSOs operating within their sphere of responsibility. Since this blame represents a threat to their reputation, PSOs react by adopting various reputation management strategies to protect their reputations. By necessity, PSOs that are increasingly concerned with reputation management have less time and fewer resources at their disposal to focus on other tasks. In the remainder of this chapter, we describe and illustrate this mechanism in detail.

Figure 1. The Causal Mechanism Between Elite Polarization and Public Service Delivery



Why Elite Polarization Matters for PSOs

PSOs should be affected by increased elite polarization and receive some of the ‘excess’ blame generated in the political realm for at least two interrelated reasons. For politicians bearing political responsibility for public service delivery, blame holds reputation-damaging potential (Busuioc & Lodge, 2016; Weaver, 1986). Therefore, they try to eliminate this blame. This is especially true in controversial cases of policy failure where politicians frequently try to deflect blame to other actors or entities that are somehow involved in the policy failure (Hinterleitner & Sager, 2015). PSOs operating in the sphere of responsibility of incumbent politicians are primary blame-deflection targets. Although the nature of policy failures is frequently contested and ‘failure’ is not just related to the primary PSO task (i.e. the application of a policy), it is most often the latter which triggers blame (McConnell, 2010). While PSOs may not be responsible for a failure, they are usually the ones that get caught with their pants down. Therefore, PSOs represent ideal ‘lightning rods’ for officeholders during crisis situations (Bach & Wegrich, 2016), which polarized elites are eager to exploit as ‘blaming opportunities’ (Hinterleitner, 2017a).

In lockstep with greater blame from politicians, we can expect that PSOs also receive more blame from the media and the public. Administrative reform trends in most Western countries have led to the break-up of monolithic bureaucracies and their frequent replacement with ‘fuzzy’ governance structures, consisting of a multiplicity of public, semi-public or private actors operating in a policy field (Bache et al., 2015; Mortensen, 2016; Verhoest et al., 2012). These reforms, frequently summarized under the term ‘agencification’, have pushed public service delivery within arm’s length of politicians’ direct control. For politicians in charge, this has the welcome effect of appearing *less involved* in the application of policies as ‘architects’, ‘managers’, or ‘decision makers’. The less involved they appear, the less ‘likely that they are to be held liable for poor performance’ (Weaver, 1986, p. 390). At the same time, many reforms

inspired by ‘new public management’, such as ‘agencification’, have made the activities of PSOs *more visible* and have exposed them to greater public scrutiny and criticism (Mortensen, 2016).

The Reputation Management of PSOs

An increase in the number and intensity of blame attacks from politicians, the media and the public represents a threat to the reputations of PSOs. Research has shown that PSOs are concerned about their reputation and, consequently, react to reputational threats (Busuioc, 2016; Carpenter, 2010a; Maor & Sulitzeanu-Kenan, 2013). How PSOs build and protect a favourable reputation and how they respond to reputational threats are some of the key questions involved in the research on organizational reputation in a public sector context (Busuioc & Lodge, 2016; Wæraas & Maor, 2015).

The literature on the determinants of bureaucratic behaviour is primarily concerned with explaining the gap between the behaviour of bureaucracies (or PSOs more generally) as prescribed in legal policy mandates and their actual behaviour (Bækkeskov, 2016; Niskanen, 1971; Pressman & Wildavsky, 1984; Wilson, 1989). In recent years, reputation seeking has emerged as an important explanatory factor of PSO behaviour (Carpenter, 2010b; Carpenter & Krause, 2012; Maor, 2011; Maor, Gilad & Bloom, 2013). The reputation of a PSO can be defined as ‘a set of symbolic beliefs about the unique or separable capacities, roles, and obligations of an organization, where these beliefs are embedded in audience networks’ (Carpenter, 2010b, p. 45).

Especially in situations where PSOs are under pressure, they seek to actively manage their reputation vis-à-vis the general public, their policy targets or politicians (Alon-Barkat & Gilad, 2016). This may involve attempts to preserve a good reputation and measures to ameliorate a

bad one. It is important to note that picturing PSOs as reputation-sensitive entities does not merely constitute an attribution of 'individual' preferences to complex organizational entities for the sake of analytical parsimony, but rather it is based on intra-organizational observations (Bækkeskov, 2016).

PSOs, which in organizational reputation research are generally considered to be rational and politically conscious entities (Wæraas & Maor, 2015), are interested in a good reputation because it helps them to achieve and conserve regulatory power (Carpenter, 2010b). A PSO with a good reputation enjoys increased autonomy and political support and can attract and keep valued employees (Alon-Barkat & Gilad, 2016; Busuioc & Lodge, 2016; Carpenter, 2002). On the contrary, a PSO with a bad reputation must fear interventions and attacks from political principals, since for the latter, a PSOs with a bad reputation presents a political liability. PSOs may become entangled in stricter regulations or suffer brain drains, and PSO managers may be forced to pack their bags and go if their political principals sacrifice them during a crisis situation.

A good reputation can thus be conceived as a 'blame shield' that protects PSOs in two ways: On one hand, a good reputation should decrease the likelihood that PSOs receive much of the excess blame created by polarized elites because the latter risk blame reversion if they decide to attack a reputed PSO (Hood, 2011). If a reputed PSO reverses the blame, it is much more likely to receive support from the media and the public. On the other hand, and for the very same reasons, a good reputation can be used as an asset if politicians shift blame downwards. Hence, an inverse relationship should exist between a PSO's reputation and it's 'lightning rod' quality for political principals.

The literature reveals a considerable number of substantive and symbolic PSO responses to reputational threats (Alon-Barkat & Gilad, 2016; Busuioc & Lodge, 2016). With regard to *substantive responses*, scholars have examined the role of reputational threats for a PSO's

prioritization of tasks (Carpenter, 2002; Gilad, 2012; 2015); for a PSO's decision to cooperate with other PSOs (Busuioc, 2016); for regulatory enforcement decisions, such as the willingness to detect noncompliant firm behaviour (Etienne, 2015) or the speed of enforcement decisions (Maor & Sulitzeanu-Kenan, 2013); for jurisdictional claim making (Maor, 2010); and for a PSO's overall output performance (Maor & Sulitzeanu-Kenan, 2015). Concerning the *symbolic responses* of PSOs, studies have shown that reputational threats determine how PSOs react to external performance judgements (Maor, Gilad & Bloom, 2013) and that reputational threats influence the strength and type of PSOs' responses to public allegations (Gilad, Alon-Barkat & Braverman, 2016; Gilad, Maor & Bloom, 2015).

While this literature has made great progress in explaining the role of reputational threats in PSO behaviour, we believe that differentiating between anticipatory and reactive forms of reputation management can conceptually enhance it. The benefits of this distinction for our understanding of the multi-faceted role of reputation in the public sector become obvious if we consider the previously described role of reputation as a blame shield. PSOs benefit from a good reputation when they are blamed; a good reputation also helps them to avoid becoming a blame target in the first place. Therefore, we can expect that PSOs engage in reputation management not only *after* they have been blamed but also *before* a potentially reputation-damaging situation emerges.

Anticipatory Reputation Management

We suggest that the concept of *anticipatory blame avoidance* allows us to further explore and better categorize PSOs' actions in anticipation of reputational threats. Anticipatory blame avoidance aims to keep a potentially blame-attracting event off the agenda and to prepare for blame-attracting events (Hinterleitner and Sager, 2017; Leong and Howlett, 2017; Sulitzeanu-Kenan and Hood, 2005). Existing research has mainly examined the use of anticipatory blame

avoidance strategies by political elites (Arnold, 1990; Bache et al., 2015; Pierson, 1996; Vis, 2016; Weaver, 1988). However, the research on organizational responses to demands for transparency (Hood & Rothstein, 2001) and blame avoidance in public administrations (Hood, 2007; 2011) suggests that this concept can also be fruitfully applied to the behaviour of PSOs.

Differentiating between anticipatory and reactive forms of blame avoidance helps to account for the fact that the need to avoid blame does not only arise *after* a crisis or policy failure has occurred and provoked blame. Under particular circumstances, officeholders, as well as PSOs, can anticipate the reputation-damaging potential of an event and will thus try to prepare for it (Arnold, 1990; McGraw, 1991). When PSOs realize – for instance through past experience or negative media coverage – that their future conduct may give rise to blame, they can attempt to make their role, capacities and obligations appear less blameworthy (Carpenter, 2010b; Maor & Sulitzeanu-Kenan, 2013). We can even expect that for PSOs, anticipatory blame avoidance is comparatively more important than reactive reputation management. Unlike political elites, they only possess limited amounts of the resources which often tip the scale during a reactive 'blame game', such as privileged access to the media or the possibility of demonstrating commitment by launching inquiries or symbolic reforms (Hinterleitner and Sager, 2017). PSOs should thus put particular emphasis on avoiding reactive blame games in the first place.

A look at the research examining the responses to reputational threats adopted by PSOs reveals that scholars do not yet explicitly distinguish between anticipatory and reactive forms of reputation management. While the symbolic responses of PSOs studied thus far describe different *reactions* to public allegations and performance judgements (Gilad, Alon-Barkat, & Braverman, 2016; Gilad, Maor & Bloom, 2015; Maor, Gilad & Bloom, 2013), most of the substantive responses examined in the previous work cover *both* anticipatory and reactive forms of reputation management. In practice, these responses are mostly analysed in a reactive context, but PSOs could theoretically also apply them in an anticipatory fashion. When it comes

to cooperation with other PSOs, for instance, a PSO may stop cooperating during a crisis situation because cooperation depletes important reputational resources, or it may anticipate its reputation vulnerability without previously going through a blame-attracting situation (Busuioc, 2016).

To further illustrate the potential of explicitly considering *anticipatory* forms of reputation management, we describe and provide examples for three types of anticipatory strategies that PSOs apply to fortify their 'blame shield'. Each of these strategies works towards protecting a PSO's reputation by decreasing the likelihood of being blamed in the first place and by preparing for blame attacks. While this categorization is neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive, it broadens our view of the various facets of reputation management and should facilitate future empirical work.

Redesigning policy measures. Many PSOs have significant discretion when applying policy mandates to concrete cases (Bækkeskov, 2016). This creates an opportunity to bring policy application in line with the beliefs and opinions of critical audiences. If PSOs have the chance to choose between particular measures, they can opt to no longer apply measures that are particularly blameworthy. If possible, PSOs can also seek to dispose of a blameworthy obligation altogether by delegating it or shifting it upwards or sideways. If PSOs cannot get rid of potentially blame-attracting obligations, they can at least attempt to redesign them. Manipulating a PSO's output in this way can signal 'preemptive obedience' to audiences and thereby reduce the likelihood that the PSO's output could become a bone of contention.

An example of this strategy can be found in a study by Maor and Sulitzeanu-Kenan (2015), who show that *Centerlink*, the Australian government's main social policy delivery agency, uses its discretion to adapt its output performance in response to negative media coverage. While the authors examine output adaptation in reaction to negative media coverage, it is also likely that PSOs try to anticipate the effects of their output decisions on media coverage and

blame. In other words, PSOs try to make their output levels appear less blame attracting in the future. Hinterleitner (2017a), examining the sanctioning practices of Swiss youth crime agencies, provided an example of how PSOs redesign policy measures in the face of reputational threats. In recent years, several aggravated assaults committed by juveniles have triggered a public outcry in Switzerland. This represented a reputational threat to cantonal crime agencies, which traditionally enjoy considerable leeway in sanctioning juvenile offenders. If a cantonal crime agency opted for an educational measure instead of a severe sanction, it risked being publicly blamed in cases where the treatment of the juvenile offender did not pay off and the latter then committed another crime. Cantonal crime agencies responded by changing their sanctioning practices. Sanctions that were widely considered to not be punitive enough were applied in fewer cases to signal a tougher stance on youth crime. This reduced the likelihood that a crime agency would be blamed for a soft, 'leftish' legal practice in cases where youth offenders recidivate. Youth advocates later indicated that the more critical public assessments of their decisions and the resulting fear of negative reactions from the media have increasingly influenced the sanctioning practices of their agencies (Mez, 2015).

Image cultivation. PSOs can not only redesign or change their output to avoid future blame generation, but they can also make their overall role in public service delivery appear less blameworthy. A PSO with a positive image reduces the likelihood of future blame attacks and prepares the PSO for situations in which it becomes the object of blame attacks. One way this can be done is by 'rebranding' the PSO. Research by Marland, Lewis and Flanagan (2017) showed that political elites are increasingly concerned with spinning government messages 'to coordinate a consistent, constant, and unified response [towards a] noisy, fragmented, pressure-filled media landscape' (127). Importantly, pressures to trim government messages are not only felt by political elites, but they also trickle down to PSOs (Marland, Lewis and Flanagan, 2017). A PSO that pre-emptively adopts the branding strategies promulgated by its political principal

signals its willingness to fully operate in the interest of the latter. This reduces the likelihood of blame attacks and autonomy-curtailing interventions.

A telling example for a PSO's rebranding is the renaming of the UK's *Department of Social Security* to the *Department for Work and Pensions* in 2001. While this departmental reorganization was publicly justified due to its coordination advantages, a 'whiff of New Labour spin', as the Guardian aptly put it, could be detected as well: 'The Department for Social Security smacked of work-shy dependency. The Department for Work and Pensions, in contrast, conjured up an image of productivity and prudence' (Wylie, 2005). In an ideological context in which the unemployed are increasingly portrayed as a non-deserving policy target group, it is obvious that a branding strategy that suggests that the department is applying a carrot-and-stick approach attracts less blame from political elites.

Controlling information. Next to image cultivation and the redesign of policy measures, PSOs can also engage in genuine information control to reduce the likelihood of political attacks and media allegations. As with the application of policy mandates to concrete cases, and despite far-reaching transparency requirements, PSOs often enjoy significant room to limit and control the information that is made available to the public. Since new information about problems in public service delivery is the basis on which blame can be created, scarcer (potentially blame triggering) information reduces the opportunities that political elites have to attack PSOs.

The research by Hood and Rothstein (2001) showed that PSOs involved in risk regulation only reluctantly respond to demands for transparency and openness. The authors explained this response as an indication of the desire for blame prevention. PSOs engage in "institutional blame prevention engineering […] because more transparency, participation, and accountability can increase the threat of blame and liability for failures" (2001, p. 25). An example from the UK illustrates the application of this strategy and its effects. In 2000, the low visitor numbers of the Millennium Dome exhibition in Greenwich, London, attracted frequent criticism from

political elites and the media. The *Millennium Dome Commission*, the organization responsible for the management of the exhibition, received a lot of the blame, which emerged every time it published its weekly visitor numbers. From June onwards, the Commission stopped publishing weekly numbers, simply arguing that they were not representative of overall performance. Although the media quickly noted this action and expressed its indignation (e.g. King, 2000), subsequent negative coverage relating to low visitor numbers declined significantly. For the commission, controlling information represented an easy way to deprive the media and political elites of future occasions to generate blame.

Implications for the study of (anticipatory) reputation management. The strategies described above and their examples reveal several important implications for the future study of PSOs' reputation management. First, at an empirical level, it may often be difficult to identify whether the impulse for the application of a reputation management strategy comes from the PSO itself, is imposed by the political principal or is a result of a combination of the two. The rebranding of the UK's *Department of Social Security* was certainly part of a more general framing strategy of the Labour government, but a PSO that eagerly adopts this framing will attract less blame from politicians. In reality, therefore, PSOs and their political principals may often act in concert when engaging in reputation management.

Second, and contrary to a widespread belief in the literature, the examples suggest that PSOs are not always interested in protecting and enhancing a *unique* reputation; that is, to cultivate their 'unique or separable capacities, roles, and obligations' (Carpenter, 2010b, p. 45). To the contrary, there may be reputation management strategies, such as 'image cultivation', which aim to manage a reputation that is firmly in line with the image of the government of the day. When it comes to reputation-damaging political attacks, it may constitute a disadvantage if PSOs stick their heads out too prominently.

Third, the previous examples also emphasize a difficulty inherent in the distinction between anticipatory and reactive forms of reputation management. What looks like the reaction to *past* allegations and blame from one perspective can be simultaneously interpreted as an anticipatory strategy to avoid *future* allegations and blame. Thus, one could argue, the distinction between anticipatory and reactive forms of reputation management is a mere question of perspectives; often, reputation management may constitute both. However, situating reputation management in time (Pierson, 2004) forces us to combine those perspectives, not blur them. Anticipatory forms of reputation management do not necessarily need a trigger in the form of materialized blame to make a PSO realize that its reputation is in danger. PSOs can equally survey their environment by considering events in the distant past that are unrelated to current events, by monitoring media coverage and the political treatment of related issues, or by observing what is going on in other jurisdictions. The implication is that anticipatory forms of reputation management may be far more widespread than the many studies examining reputation management in reactive contexts lead us to assume. Just like an iceberg is much bigger below the water's surface, it could be that reputation management is much more widespread if we consider all the cases in which PSOs apply them in the absence of a concrete blame trigger.

Repercussions for Public Service Delivery

A look at these strategies suggests that their more frequent application in response to increased blame generation in the political realm will not be without repercussions. Two specific types of consequences for public service delivery suggest that the mechanism at the heart of this chapter does not end here. While both consequences are *slowly evolving* as PSOs increasingly focus on reputation management, one is *unintended*, and the other is *purposeful* in nature (Lodge, this volume).

First, we can assume that PSOs which prioritize reputation management have less time and resources at their disposal to focus on other tasks. Gilad (2012), for example, showed that PSOs that concentrate on reputation management become slower at adapting to new cues from their environment. PSOs that spend increasing resources on reputation management are thus more likely to experience surprises in their environment (Lodge, this volume): information that is potentially vital for effective public service delivery is neglected as PSOs predominantly scan their environment for reputational threats. This constitutes an *unintended* consequence of reputation management, since PSOs do not deliberately turn a blind eye to public service-relevant information; they are simply distracted by a concern for their reputation.

Second, a reputation-conscious type of service delivery can be in open conflict with predefined policy goals in some cases. The previously mentioned Swiss youth crime agencies, which increasingly apply more punitive measures to juvenile offenders to please critical publics and conservative politicians, are a case in point. The increased application of stricter measures runs contrary to the mandate of the Swiss juvenile justice policy, in which the primary goals are the protection, education and (re)integration of young offenders into society (Hinterleitner, 2017a). The research overwhelmingly shows that these goals are best achieved through integrative measures, not by punishing juvenile offenders. The conclusions of this example are supported by the broader literature on blame avoidance and reputation management, which suggests that elites and PSOs deliberately prioritize to avoid blame and protect their reputation over other motivations when they feel threatened (Bækkeskov, 2016; Hinterleitner, 2017b; Weaver, 1986). The deliberate neglect of tasks and duties for the sake of intensified reputation management constitutes a *purposeful* change to public service delivery.

In sum, PSOs' greater focus on reputation management contributes to forms of task prioritization by PSOs which can be problematic from both a policy and a democratic perspective. Intensified reputation management by PSOs may decrease policy effectiveness.

PSOs that prioritize crafting responses to reputational threats may (consciously or unconsciously) neglect tasks and duties that are potentially decisive for effective and problem-oriented public service delivery. Moreover, task prioritization in response to increased blame generation is also problematic from a democratic perspective. If a pressure group wants to change policy, it must usually go through majoritarian channels. If it does not find a majority, its request for policy change will be blocked. The mechanism posited in this chapter suggests that pressure groups can bypass democratic channels if they only shout loud enough.

Scope Conditions for the Mechanism's Operation

Whether the mechanism leading from elite polarization to PSOs' prioritization of tasks unfolds as described above depends on the presence of scope conditions. Relevant scope conditions are those aspects of a setting 'which allow the mechanism to produce the outcome' (Falleti & Lynch, 2009, p. 1152). In other words, scope conditions are a prerequisite for each entity to engage in the activity posited by the mechanism. For example, if a PSO does not fear reputational damage from political blame, it will hardly intensify (usually costly) reputation management efforts. In that case, the mechanism breaks down and does not lead to changes in task prioritization.

The literature on organizational reputation suggests a number of important conditions that must be present for elite polarization to have an effect on public service delivery. First, how much a PSO fears reputational damage from blame deflection by elites depends on whether this blame relates to the 'unique' reputation(s) of a PSO. Reputation uniqueness 'refers to the demonstration by agencies that they can create solutions and provide services found nowhere else in the polity' (Gilad, Maor & Bloom, 2015, pp. 453–54). Blame that threatens to erode unique reputation(s) is much more dangerous for PSOs than blame that is related to more peripheral tasks and duties.

Second, as already mentioned, whether a PSO can respond to reputational threats depends on the presence and extent of its discretion to apply policy mandates to concrete cases (Bækkeskov, 2016). A PSO that has its hands tied (i.e. it cannot adopt reputation management strategies to respond to reputational threats) will not – at least in the way described – contribute to changes in public service delivery, even though it may well be aware of the reputation-damaging potential of blame attacks.

Third, whether a PSO increasingly engaging in reputation management unwittingly neglects other tasks and duties also depends on the availability of resources. Since reputation management is costly and occupies attention, resource availability should at least partially be responsible for whether PSOs can uphold public service delivery, even in high-blame environments. A concurrent political phenomenon – austerity – dampens optimism in this regard, as many Western public administrations suffer from increased resource constraints (Hinterleitner, Sager & Thomann, 2016; Lodge & Hood, 2012; Sager & Hinterleitner, 2016).

Finally, whether a PSO predominantly focusing on reputation management is willing to forgo other tasks and duties for this purpose depends on its organizational identity (Gilad, 2015). A PSO with an identity that prioritizes particular goals and tasks should be less willing to subsume those tasks under the imperative of reputation management.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we attempt to connect the research on salient current political developments with the research on public service delivery by exploring and conceptualizing a link between elite polarization and task prioritization by PSOs. This entails two specific contributions to the literature. First, by connecting the political realm with the public service realm, we outline a way to keep track of the multiple policy implications of current political phenomena, such as

elite polarization or populism. This approach allows the crafting of truly 'political' explanations for public service developments such as reputation-sensitive task prioritization. Our chapter further suggests that the links between the political realm and the public service realm may often be difficult to identify and conceptualize, as they involve several steps. Examining these steps may require zooming in on various actors and entities and carefully studying their motivations and behaviour. Second, and with regard to the specific mechanism examined in this chapter, we show that research can profit from the improved conceptualizing of PSOs' responses to reputational threats. Looking at anticipatory forms of reputation management, although empirically challenging, should broaden our perspective on this important phenomenon and provide us a better understanding of its pervasiveness. Finally, a limitation regarding 'pervasiveness' is in order. As the section on scope conditions has already detailed, several conditions must come together for elite polarization to leave an imprint on public service delivery. Therefore, to conclude that in today's polarized political environment that PSOs have little else to do other than manage their reputation towards critical audiences would be grossly overstated. Instead, it is necessary to consider the influence of reputation seeking in conjunction with other motivations for PSO behaviour to get a grasp of the importance of this phenomenon.

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