

Governing elites under pressure: Blame avoidance strategies and welfare state retrenchment

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Abstract: This chapter makes conceptual progress on an important puzzle in the research on welfare state retrenchment: Are welfare states retrenched because governing elites are astute blame avoiders or because important parts of the electorate have come to believe in the austerity medicine prescribed by mainstream economists? Existing research is, by and large, ill placed to address this question because it treats blame avoidance as a latent variable that is neither measured nor empirically observed. To cast some light on this important puzzle, this chapter develops a comprehensive categorization of blame avoidance strategies that governing elites can employ to avoid electoral punishment for retrenchment. The categorization identifies the mechanics of particular strategies and yields insights into their applicability, empirical traces, and effects on voters. In so doing, it can guide future research on the causal determinants of successful welfare state retrenchment. Progress on this puzzle promises important insights into how the governing elites of modern capitalist democracies juggle to reconcile domestic demands and supranational constraints.

1. Introduction

In 2011, the German chancellor, Angela Merkel, (in)famously remarked that democracies must be ‘market-conforming’ (Merkel 2011). While Merkel could have spared herself substantial trouble if she had made her point in a less blame-attracting way, she arguably described one of the major conundrums that the governing elites of modern capitalist democracies face on an almost daily basis. One, if not the, major reason for why governing elites – broadly understood here as heads of state, ministers, leaders of the parties in government, and top-level bureaucrats – have increasingly come under pressure in recent years is the far-reaching integration of modern states into the world economy. Their integration into global markets implies that governing elites must be responsive to two ‘constituencies’, instead of just one (Schäfer and Streeck 2013; Mair 2009). Traditionally, governing elites primarily had to be responsive to the

demands of their voters. In democracies integrated into the world economy, governing elites must additionally address the demands of markets, which often conflict with those of voters (Hinterleitner et al. 2016; Sager and Hinterleitner 2016). Since the global financial crisis and the ensuing Euro crisis, governing elites must find ways to please and communicate with both constituencies in an especially difficult environment. As governing elites struggle to reconcile domestic demands with supranational constraints, a new kind of politics is emerging and awaits exploration (Schäfer and Streeck 2013).

A major policy issue on which voter and market demands frequently collide is that of managing the welfare state. Welfare states, with their inherent tendencies to expand, are a *bête noire* in the eyes of global markets given that they contribute to national budget growth and thereby threaten complete and timely debt service – one of the key demands of global markets (Schäfer and Streeck 2013). To please the demands of global markets, governing elites must credibly signal their willingness for fiscal rectitude. This frequently involves welfare state retrenchment, i.e. the cutting of all kinds of social policy. However, unsurprisingly, voters are often skeptical about cutting back on public services, especially if they rely on them and have come to take them for granted. If governing elites do not meet their demands, voters tend to withdraw their loyalty (Schäfer and Streeck 2013).

The large and diverse literature on welfare state retrenchment, to which Klaus Armingeon contributed substantially (Armingeon and Giger 2008; Armingeon et al. 2015), advances our understanding of how governing elites manage conflicting demands with regard to the welfare state. The literature suggests that governing elites employ a range of blame avoidance strategies to avoid electoral punishment for welfare state retrenchment. However, due to its large-N and comparative orientation, the literature does not usually zoom in on governing elites to study their actual strategic behavior under pressure. For the most part, blame avoidance remains a latent variable in research on welfare state retrenchment (Vis 2016). As a consequence, there are still major shortcomings in our understanding of how governing elites strike a balance between responsiveness to their voters and to supranational demands, and how this influences the trajectory of democratic welfare states.

This chapter aims to address these shortcomings by better connecting the literature on welfare state retrenchment to the blame avoidance literature in public policy and administration research (Weaver 1986; Hood 2011; Hinterleitner and Sager 2015; Hinterleitner 2017). This literature adopts a different, more micro-level oriented approach that allows for the study of actual blame avoidance and its effects. Based on this literature, we develop a comprehensive categorization of blame avoidance strategies that deepens our understanding of the latent variable ‘blame avoidance’ and helps to advance the study of welfare state retrenchment on at least three fronts.

The categorization reveals the conditions under which politicians can apply various blame avoidance strategies, the empirical traces that their application leaves behind, and their potential effects on voters. By zooming in on the applicability, empirical traces, and effects of particular

blame avoidance strategies, our categorization offers the potential to create a more profound understanding of governing elites' attempts to retrench the welfare state. Progress on this issue not only helps illuminate one of the key challenges that governing elites face in modern capitalist democracies, but it also has broader implications for how to study and disentangle the determinants of policy outcomes. Political science, by and large, often struggles to determine the respective influences of voters and elites on policy outcomes (Hall et al. 2016).

The next section provides a short overview of the literature on welfare state retrenchment. The overview concentrates on the blame avoidance variable and outlines the questions and puzzles that require deeper examination in order to study actual elite behavior. The second section introduces the blame avoidance literature in public policy and administration research and presents a categorization of blame avoidance strategies that governing elites apply to avoid electoral punishment for welfare state retrenchment. The third section elaborates on the pay-offs of this categorization effort for future empirical work on welfare state retrenchment.

2. Blame avoidance as the 'blind spot' of the literature on welfare state retrenchment

Research on welfare state retrenchment originates in the seminal work by Paul Pierson (1994, 1996), which argues that the theories that explain welfare state expansion cannot automatically be applied to the study of welfare state retrenchment because the underlying political logic of retrenchment differs from a logic of expansion (Pierson 2001). In times of austerity, politicians struggle to reconcile policy necessities with their vote goals. When public budgets were not yet in dire straits, governing elites could claim credit for expansionary policy initiatives and thereby enhance their chances of getting re-elected (Weaver 1986). On the contrary, retrenchment initiatives, which are difficult to avoid in times of austerity (Armingeon et al. 2015), cause immediate and tangible losses for social groups, thereby threatening the vote goals of governing elites. Pierson sees blame avoidance as a way to reconcile the goals of governing elites in an altered fiscal context: Pursuing retrenchment while minimizing the likelihood and extent of electoral retribution (Hinterleitner 2017; Starke 2006).

Pierson's seminal work triggered a raft of research on welfare state retrenchment in different political and historical settings. Scholars particularly directed their attention to the conditions under which governing elites successfully pursued retrenchment initiatives (Hinterleitner 2017). Their work identified a number of factors that influence whether or not retrenchment is successful, such as the institutional fragmentation of a political system, the partisan composition of the government (Jensen and Mortensen 2014), or party political consensus (Green-Pedersen 2002). This research refines Pierson's work by carefully determining the scope conditions of his theory. However, in doing so, it mostly adopts a comparative, macro-level focus that studies welfare state retrenchment from a great distance, and the actual behavior of politicians slips from view. As a result, this research, for the most part, tacitly assumes that

when politicians retrenched the welfare state, it was because they successfully applied blame avoidance strategies. In cases where retrenchment did not take place, it was because governing elites applied blame avoidance in vain.

The question resulting from this blind spot, and which was addressed by subsequent research, is whether politicians always, and under all conditions, (have to) engage in blame avoidance when they want or have to retrench the welfare state. In other words, are there situations in which unpopular reforms do not lead to electoral retribution because voters do not care, or are even appreciative of retrenchment? In a study of 18 OECD democracies, Klaus Armingeon and Nathalie Giger (2008) found that there is indeed no systematic punishment of governing elites that retrench the welfare state. In the wake of this finding, several studies explored the factors that condition electoral punishment for welfare state retrenchment, qualifying the assumption that retrenchment leads to electoral punishment under all circumstances and for all types of political actors. Accordingly, this finding raised doubts about whether or not politicians need blame avoidance strategies in order to successfully cut social policy (Giger and Nelson 2011, 2013; Schumacher et al. 2012; Nelson 2016). The two major findings from this research reveal that partisan composition of the government and various policy characteristics (as perceived by voters) condition electoral punishment (see the detailed discussion in Vis 2016). While religious and liberal parties face less electoral punishment (and can even obtain votes) for retrenching the welfare state, left parties are more likely to be punished if they cut back on social policy (Giger and Nelson 2011). Likewise, retrenching policies that are salient to or popular among constituents are especially likely to result in electoral punishment (Green-Pedersen 2002; Jensen 2012).

However, plagued by the same ‘blind spot’ as previous work – failing to measure actual blame avoidance – this research does not answer the question of whether governing elites avoid electoral punishment because certain voter groups do not care about retrenchment (or even appreciate it) or because their blame avoidance efforts proved successful. The existing research does not provide a conclusive answer to this question because it mostly treats blame avoidance as a latent variable instead of actually studying blame avoidance and its effects at the level of individual politicians (Vis 2016). Armingeon and Giger (2008), for example, use the time frame during which entitlements are cut back in order to infer whether or not governing elites engage in blame avoidance. They assume that a long time span indicates that governing elites deliberately ‘phased out’ retrenchment. While this is a plausible conclusion, it is only possible to gather solid evidence for the posited relationship at the individual level. Likewise, Giger and Nelson (2013) study voters’ predispositions towards retrenchment in order to better understand under which conditions they punish governing elites at the ballot box. Using voters’ reactions to retrenchment, they infer the success prospects of the particular blame avoidance strategies adopted by the government. Again, while this is a plausible conclusion, it lacks strong evidence without the study of the actual blame avoidance behavior.

Recent research on welfare state retrenchment zooms in on governing elites and studies their blame avoidance efforts by analyzing public statements and conducting interviews (Wenzelburger 2011). This research reveals that governing elites are very creative when it comes to finding ways to avoid electoral punishment for retrenchment (see more on this below), and it suggests that it is not the actual but the perceived electoral risk that entices politicians to engage in blame avoidance (Wenzelburger 2014; Hinterleitner 2018). Focusing on governing elites' perceptions helps to explain why they even engage in blame avoidance in situations where it would not be necessary because voters do not care or even acknowledge the need for retrenchment.

Despite these important contributions, research on welfare state retrenchment still lacks answers to an important question. In situations where politicians manage to retrench the welfare state, is it because voters do not care (or even appreciate retrenchment) or because the politician successfully engaged in blame avoidance? In the words of Vis (2016), "we do not know whether the lack of punishment is due to retrenchment not being electorally dangerous or because this electoral danger has been removed with a successful blame avoidance strategy".

While this question may seem like a minor obstacle for a research program that has made considerable progress over the last decades, it goes to the core of one of the main debates in current political science research: the relative influence of voters and governing elites on policy outcomes. Prominent scholars increasingly challenge the widespread assumption in political science that support from the majority of voters constitutes a sufficient explanation for policy outcomes (Beramendi et al. 2015). Instead, they emphasize the conditionality of the influence of voters on policy (Culpepper 2011; Hall et al. 2016). They urge the discipline to not only consider the 'demand side' of politics but also the 'supply side' of it, which consists of "strategic actors with communication and branding strategies" (Hall et al. 2016, 390; König and Wenzelburger 2014). To understand policy outcomes, like successful welfare state retrenchment, it is therefore necessary to consider how governing elites strategically react to and manage the demands of their voters.

3. What is blame avoidance?

For the literature on welfare state retrenchment, there is no avoiding the need to zoom in on governing elites to establish when, whether, and how they (successfully) engage in blame avoidance. Recent research identifies experimental research methods as a promising way to study the effect of blame avoidance strategies on voters' perception of welfare state retrenchment (Wenzelburger 2014; Wenzelburger and Hörisch 2016). Meanwhile, there is also a need to develop an understanding of the applicability and application of blame avoidance strategies in real-life policy-making situations. Important preconditions for determining whether retrenchment is due to successful blame avoidance or to citizens' indifference (or acknowledgement of the retrenchment) include knowledge about whether or not governing

elites are able to apply a blame avoidance strategy in a certain context and which empirical traces to look for in order to identify a given strategy.

To create knowledge about the applicability and application of blame avoidance strategies, it is important to first develop clear-cut categorizations of the various blame avoidance strategies that governing elites (can) employ to successfully retrench the welfare state. In recent years, scholars have developed several useful categorizations (e.g. Wenzelburger 2011; Giger and Nelson 2011; Vis 2016). However, most of them are not sufficiently comprehensive, do not yield clear indications on what to look for and where to look to identify and measure particular strategies, and, they do not distinguish between anticipatory and reactive forms of blame avoidance (see below). To address these limitations, we draw on the blame avoidance literature in the fields of public policy and administration, which allows us to develop a categorization of blame avoidance strategies that maps and clearly distinguishes between the many strategies governing elites can apply in order to avoid punishment for cutting social policies.

The concept of blame avoidance assumes that governing elites are reputation-conscious actors who apply various strategies to avoid and manage the blame that comes from their voters. According to Weaver (1986), who pioneered the study of blame avoidance, governing elites engage in blame avoidance because of their loss aversion and their concern toward the negativity bias of voters – i.e. the propensity of voters to be more sensitive to real or potential losses than to gains (Lau 1985; Hinterleitner 2017). We can thus expect governing elites to engage in blame avoidance whenever blame generated by political opponents, the media, or the public threatens their reputation (Hinterleitner 2017; Busuioc and Lodge 2016; Weaver 1986). In this context, it is useful to think of reputation as a form of political capital that allows governing elites to pursue and reconcile their (re-)election and policy goals. Governing elites that have a strong reputation are less likely to become the target of blame attacks in the first place, and they are more resilient to blame attacks if they do occur. A strong reputation thereby facilitates staying in office even in situations where policy goals are incompatible with the preferences of voters (Hinterleitner and Sager 2018). In short, blame avoidance helps governing elites to protect their reputation, and a strong reputation helps them to reach their (re-)election and policy goals (and makes them compatible in case they are contradictory).

A look at the reputation-protecting and reputation-enhancing effects of blame avoidance strategies reveals an important (and hitherto neglected) distinction between various forms of blame avoidance. Governing elites not only protect and enhance their reputation in crisis situations; they also do so before a crisis strikes. This is why it is important to distinguish between *anticipatory* and *reactive forms of blame avoidance* (Hinterleitner and Sager 2017; Sulitzeanu-Kenan and Hood 2005). If governing elites anticipate a potentially blame-generating political decision, they can prepare for it in a variety of ways. The strategies that governing elites employ to prepare for blameworthy events are very different to those that they apply in the midst of a ‘blame game’ (Hinterleitner 2018). So called ‘agency strategies’ and ‘policy

strategies' can predominantly be applied in an anticipatory fashion because they require distinct political resources and time for their successful application. 'Presentational strategies', on the contrary, mainly draw on political rhetoric, and politicians can apply them before and during a blame game. (Hood 2007, 2011). The following provides a brief description of these strategy types.

Agency strategies seek to reallocate responsibilities and competencies in order to shift the risk of being blamed to others. In case of blame, the reallocated responsibilities allow governing elites to more credibly deflect responsibility and blame onto other actors involved in a policy-making situation (Hood 2007). An example of an agency strategy is the delegation of activities to actors lower down in the administrative hierarchy. By applying this strategy to contentious activities or responsibilities, governing elites hope to lower the risk of reputational damage once the activity attracts blame.

Policy strategies address the policy as such. This strategy type seeks to make governmental activities less blameworthy by redesigning policies or changing the ways that they emanate (Hood 2011). If governing elites are able to choose between two policies, they may choose the one that is less likely to attract blame. Governing elites may also change the content of a policy by replacing particular blameworthy aspects with less controversial ones. Moreover, governing elites can try to manipulate the procedures through which policies emanate by, for example, limiting the opportunities for political opponents to voice their criticism.

Presentational strategies follow a different logic. Instead of reallocating competencies or changing the substance of a policy, they seek to present policy decisions and governmental activities in a blame-avoiding or blame-limiting way (Hood 2011). The ways in which governing elites attempt to do so are manifold and include reframing an activity, finding excuses for it, deflecting blame onto other actors, distracting the public by pointing to other issues, or timing the political debate about a contentious activity.

4. A Categorization of Blame Avoidance Strategies

In the following, we use the distinctions of anticipatory and reactive forms of blame avoidance and agency, policy, and presentational strategies to categorize governing elites' efforts to avoid electoral punishment for welfare state retrenchment (see Table 1 for an overview).

Table 1: Blame avoidance strategies applied by governing elites to avoid punishment for retrenchment.

	<i>Agency strategies</i>	<i>Policy strategies</i>	<i>Presentational strategies</i>
<i>Anticipatory blame avoidance</i>	- Engage in social concertation	- Stretch retrenchment over a longer period of time	- Muffle resistance against retrenchment within (the) government party(ies)
	- Assign retrenchment tasks to other actors	- Time retrenchment	- Prepare retrenchment in secrecy
		- Spread burdens of retrenchment widely	
		- Make hidden cuts	
<i>Reactive blame avoidance</i>			- Reframe retrenchment
			- Apply emergency rhetoric
			- Deflect blame for retrenchment

4.1. Agency Strategies

The literature on welfare state retrenchment discusses at least two agency strategies. First, governing elites can engage in social concertation during the retrenchment process. Social concertation spreads responsibility for policy outcomes among several actors (Afonso 2013). By involving trade unions and/or employers in the policy-making process, governing elites express their will to find socially acceptable forms of retrenchment (Wenzelburger 2011). Moreover, by involving additional actors in the policy-making process, governing elites transform potential opponents into accomplices who, being bound to adopt a constructive stance, are deprived of the opportunity to generate blame.

Second, governing elites can assign various tasks associated with retrenchment to technocratic agencies or expert committees that are not directly accountable to voters (Wenzelburger 2011). Governing elites can use such agencies to rubber stamp their proposals for retrenchment, thereby endowing them with an ‘objective’ stamp of approval. Or, governing elites can instruct such agencies to propose concrete retrenchment proposals that they then accept. By integrating an ‘agency loop’ into the policy-making process, governing elites make retrenchment appear more ‘automatic’, conjuring the impression that their hands are tied (Weaver 1988). Another variant of this strategy is what Zohlnhöfer (2007) calls ‘institutional cooperation’, i.e. colluding with other parties in the political system to adopt retrenchment measures.

4.2. Policy Strategies

The literature mentions at least four policy strategies. The first of these strategies, which appears in several papers, is to stretch retrenchment over a longer time span (Armingeon and Giger

2008). Gradually implementing retrenchment measures, instead of implementing them all at once, makes their perceived losses appear smaller. Smaller losses lead to less public outrage at specific points in time and thereby help to partition blame into more easily manageable parts (Pal and Weaver 2003). Over time, the affected social groups may get used to the cuts and public outrage may wane.

Another policy strategy that receives considerable attention in the literature is the strategic timing of retrenchment (Zohlnhöfer 2007; Tepe and Vanhuysse 2010). Instead of slicing painful retrenchment measures into several more easily digestible parts, this strategy implements them all at once. However, in doing so, governing elites exploit the election cycle. For example, they try to implement social policy cuts directly after important elections, expecting that the public outrage associated with them will deaden by the next elections.

A third policy strategy targets the scope and distribution of retrenchments. Instead of placing a heavy burden on a small number of social groups, governing elites can try to spread the burden of retrenchment among as many groups as possible (Wenzelburger 2011). The intended effect of this strategy is similar to that of the ‘slicing’ strategy described above. By spreading the burden of retrenchment, governing elites calculate that smaller per capita losses will reduce the likelihood that affected social groups will voice criticism and actively oppose the planned retrenchment measures. Refined variants of this strategy seek to disproportionately distribute losses to weaker social groups that are less capable of mobilizing on retrenchment and to compensate stronger social groups through side-payments (Pierson 1994; Bonoli and Palier 2007).

The fourth policy strategy conceals retrenchment measures from voters and affected social groups as far as possible (Pierson 1994). Not all forms of retrenchment have an immediate and tangible financial effect. Some retrenchment measures only kick in over time, others, like the adjustment of indices (Wagschal and Wenzelburger 2008), are harder to identify as forms of politically imposed retrenchment. Another variant of this strategy is to ‘hide’ retrenchment from voters (and hinder political opponents from exposing it) by bundling retrenchment measures with other policy issues, for example in the form of omnibus laws (Wenzelburger 2011). By applying this strategy, governing elites can expect the perceived extent of retrenchment to be smaller than it actually is, lowering the probability that retrenchment will become a bone of contention.

4.3. Presentational Strategies

Unlike agency and policy strategies, which clearly possess an anticipatory character, some of the presentational strategies identified in this section can theoretically be applied in both an anticipatory and reactive fashion. Nevertheless, it is possible to distinguish between strategies that primarily intend to preclude or limit political debate about retrenchment (anticipatory strategies) and strategies that aim to steer a political debate in a particular direction, or at least

limit its negative (reputational) effects (reactive strategies). An anticipatory presentational strategy seeks to muffle resistance against retrenchment within the governing party or coalition (Parsons and Weber 2011). If the party or coalition in government is rather skeptical of retrenchment, governing elites can attempt to demobilize ‘internal’ opposition. During blame games about welfare state retrenchment, governing elites usually benefit from the support of their party/parties. Closed ranks allow governing elites to isolate the opinions put forward by political opponents and to dismiss their attacks as hypocritical vote-seeking behavior.

Another anticipatory presentational strategy is to prepare retrenchment measures in secrecy in order to surprise opponents and limit their ability to scrutinize and deliberate on the proposed measures (White 2015b). Protracted retrenchment plans allow political opponents to position themselves and organize opposition to them. On the contrary, political opponents that are surprised by the retrenchment plans of governing elites have less time to generate blame and to organize opposition against retrenchment plans among affected social groups.

Other presentational strategies are predominantly reactive. First, governing elites can try to reframe retrenchment and cast it in a more positive light (Elmelund-Praestekaer and Emmenegger 2013). For instance, they can portray retrenchment as a precondition for economic sovereignty in the long run, or frame it as a form of ‘diet’ that guarantees a functioning welfare state in the future (Wenzelburger 2011). In this perspective, retrenchment does not appear to be an incision; it is simply a ‘maintenance’ measure that is needed from time to time to keep the system going.

A related strategy that governing elites frequently apply when they face acute pressure from voters but cannot postpone retrenchment is to adopt various forms of emergency rhetoric. A prominent form of emergency rhetoric is known by the acronym ‘TINA’, standing for ‘there is no alternative’ (White 2015a; Séville 2017). The TINA rhetoric signals to the public that governing elites have no choice but to quickly implement retrenchment measures in order to avoid fiscal catastrophe (Vis and van Kersbergen 2007). This strategy aims to convince the public of the unavoidable and casts political opponents who rebel against the retrenchment measures as ‘irresponsible’.

Finally, governing elites can deflect blame for retrenchment onto other actors (Wenzelburger 2011). If they had previously endowed an agency with the preparation or implementation of retrenchment measures, they would be able to deflect blame onto that agency. Governing elites can also accuse former governments of fiscal recklessness, which allegedly brought the welfare systems under strain in the first place, and which now makes retrenchment unavoidable. Other obvious scapegoats include global markets and their demands for timely ‘debt service’.

5. Insights into the applicability, empirical traces, and effects of blame avoidance strategies

The categorization presented in the previous section reveals a considerable number of blame avoidance strategies that governing elites (can) apply to avoid electoral punishment for welfare state retrenchment. The categorization makes distinctions and yields insights that help to advance the study of welfare state retrenchment on at least three fronts.

First, the categorization makes important distinctions with regard to the *applicability* of certain strategies. Governing elites can only apply agency and policy strategies before blame for a policy issue has developed, because governing elites must mobilize considerable resources and invest considerable time to put them in place. For example, if governing elites decide to charge an agency with the design and implementation of social policy cuts when retrenchment is already prominently on the agenda, political opponents and the media are very likely to decipher this as a brazen blame avoidance move and will accordingly rebel against assigning responsibility to the agency. If governing elites set up the agency well in advance of an eventual blame game, the likelihood of political attention and resistance becomes smaller. In short, agency and policy strategies lack credibility if politicians implement them swiftly (Hinterleitner and Sager 2017).

Moreover, the application of agency and policy strategies is often at odds with both national institutional structures and the supranational constraints that prompt governing elites to apply them in the first place. In many situations, governing elites simply lack the institutional power to design welfare state retrenchment in a less blame-attracting way, because, for instance, they do not dispose of other actors with which they can collude (Zohlnhöfer 2007). Or, governing elites may intend to stretch retrenchment over a longer time span, but financial markets may insist on the immediate and timely implementation of retrenchment efforts, thereby depriving governing elites of the opportunity to apply a potentially effective blame avoidance strategy. Circumstances are different in the case of presentational strategies. Although ‘talk’ is not cheap for governing elites, and it requires a number of circumstances in order to be credible (Vis 2010; van Kersbergen and Vis 2015), politicians can apply presentational strategies to a greater number of political situations than they can with agency and policy strategies.

A careful and systematic look at the conditions that determine the applicability of certain blame avoidance strategies is a first step in determining whether governing elites have the opportunity to engage in certain forms of blame avoidance in a given situation. Doing so allows research to systematically exclude strategies that are inapplicable in certain situations and concentrate on those that are applicable. If we conclude that it is not possible at all for governing elites to apply blame avoidance strategies in a given situation, we can hypothesize that a lack of punishment for retrenchment is mainly due to a lack of voter opposition.

Second, the categorization yields clear-cut descriptions of the mechanics underlying certain strategies. An understanding of the mechanics helps to identify the *empirical traces* of blame

avoidance strategies in real-life policy-making situations. Presentational strategies are relatively easy to identify because whenever governing elites apply them, they leave traces in the form of public statements. Identifying a reframing strategy or a blame deflection strategy is a straightforward endeavor. Agency and policy strategies also leave discernable empirical traces. Agency strategies cause institutional reshuffles that reduce the perceived responsibility of governing elites while positioning other actors more prominently. Policy strategies leave clearly identifiable imprints on aspects of policies, such as the processes through which they are adopted or the financial implications for different social groups.

Nevertheless, identifying empirical traces of agency and policy strategies can often be difficult because their application occurs significantly before they come into effect, i.e. before they ‘work’ in the interest of governing elites. Research thus needs to show that at some point in time, governing elites were aware of a future threat and began to intentionally prepare for it (Wenzelburger 2014; Hinterleitner and Sager 2017). This is to say, not everything that serves a blame avoidance purpose was initially contrived for that purpose.

Third, the categorization above also provides information about the concrete *effect(s)* of blame avoidance strategies, and thereby helps to measure the success of strategies (e.g. in experimental research). Measuring the success of blame avoidance strategies requires a concrete understanding of the thoughts and opinions that politicians hope to alter among voters or specific social groups. For example, an agency strategy that reshuffles responsibilities is successful if, after its application, the level of blame directed at governing elites decreases, while the level of blame directed at actors at the ‘frontline’ increases. A presentational strategy is successful if the media adopts the framing and arguments put forward by governing elites.

Knowledge about the concrete effects of certain strategies helps empirical research to refine its measurements of ‘successful’ blame avoidance. Existing literature, for the most part, uses relatively crude measures, such as election outcomes or approval ratings; measures that are frequently influenced by a large number of confounding variables. Thinking more systematically about the effects of blame avoidance strategies can help scholars to develop innovative and more precise measurements of success.

Overall, knowledge about the applicability, mechanics, and concrete effects of various blame avoidance strategies facilitates our ability to hypothesize and conduct fruitful empirical research on when we can expect governing elites to successfully retrench the welfare state.

6. Governing elites as ‘master jugglers’

This chapter makes conceptual progress on an important puzzle in the research on welfare state retrenchment: Are welfare states retrenched because governing elites are astute blame avoiders or because important parts of the electorate have come to believe in the austerity medicine prescribed by mainstream economists? To cast some light on this important puzzle, the chapter develops a comprehensive overview and categorization of the blame avoidance strategies that

governing elites can employ in order to avoid electoral punishment for retrenchment. The categorization identifies the mechanics of particular strategies, yields insights into their applicability, reveals the empirical traces that their application leaves behind, and predicts their likely effects on voters. In so doing, the categorization can guide future research on the causal determinants of successful welfare state retrenchment. This categorization helps researchers to assess the likelihood of whether or not a politician applied a blame avoidance strategy in a given situation, identify empirical traces in situations where its application is likely, and helps researchers to conceptualize and measure the concrete effects of blame avoidance strategies on voters' perception of welfare state retrenchment.

Progress on this puzzle is vitally important because in addition to helping us better understand the future form of democratic welfare states, it is representative of a broader range of difficult situations that the governing elites of modern, capitalist democracies find themselves in. Governing successfully in modern capitalist democracies requires making domestic demands and supranational constraints compatible. The careful pondering and strategic action of governing elites in this context reconfigure the political playing field (Schäfer and Streeck 2013; Mair 2009). The literature on welfare state retrenchment, provided it zooms in on elite decision-making and addresses one of its most important research puzzles head-on, is ideally placed to be at the forefront of researching the nexus of where domestic demands 'collide' with supranational constraints.

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