





# Blame avoidance in hard times: complex governance structures and the COVID-19 pandemic

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## ABSTRACT

This article investigates how governments shift blame during large-scale, prolonged crises. While existing research shows that governments can effectively diffuse blame through ‘fuzzy’ governance structures, less is known about blame diffusion patterns during severe crises when citizens widely expect governments to assume leadership. The article develops expectations on how blame diffusion patterns – consisting of blame-shifting onto lower-level government units, citizens and experts – look and differ in fuzzy governance structures (the political *courant normal*) and in consolidated governance structures (when governments are called on to consolidate responsibility). The article then tests this theoretical argument with a within-unit longitudinal study of the blame diffusion patterns employed by the Swiss Federal Council (FC) during press conferences held during the COVID-19 pandemic. The period under analysis (March–December 2020) is divided into three phases characterised by different governance structures due to the FC’s enactment of emergency law. The analysis reveals that blame diffusion patterns vary considerably across phases and that blame spills out of the political system when fuzzy governance structures ‘lose their bite’. These findings are relevant for our understanding of democratic governance under pressure.

**KEYWORDS** Blame; crisis; governance; accountability; COVID-19

This article investigates how governments shift blame during large-scale, prolonged crises. The governments of advanced democracies are frequently criticised for deliberately relinquishing executive discretion and policy-making power to ‘non-majoritarian’ or ‘arm’s-length’ bodies in order to depoliticise issues and to provide a solution to the ‘credible commitment dilemma’ (Majone 1997). This ‘unbundling’ (Pollitt and Talbot 2014) of the state, which is a central concern in Colin Hay’s *Why We Hate Politics* (2007), Peter Mair’s *Ruling the Void* (2013) and Paul

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Fawcett *et al.*'s *Anti-Politics, Depoliticisation and Governance* (2017), highlights the narrowing of the sphere that elected governments are willing to accept direct responsibility for and points to the problem of locating public accountability within increasingly complex governance structures (Flinders 2002).

At the same time, and largely separate from this debate, there is the long- and widely-held belief in the social sciences that 'the state' particularly and primarily assumes responsibility and exerts leadership during extraordinary times. As Carl Schmitt (2005: 5) famously put it, '[s]overeign is he who decides on the exception.'<sup>1</sup> The philosopher Peter Sloterdijk (2020) recently followed this same line of reasoning by remarking that during the COVID-19 pandemic, 'the state took off the kid gloves with which it handles its citizens in normal times' (see also Kettemann and Lachmayer 2021). During crises, governments can therefore be expected to face more intense public scrutiny than during the political *courant normal* when responsibility is distributed more widely and is therefore harder to locate within governance structures. One may thus ask whether existing insights on the politics of blame and accountability also apply to situations marked by large-scale prolonged crises.

This article addresses this question by examining and comparing governmental blame avoidance during 'normal' and 'extraordinary' times. While existing research shows that governments can effectively shift blame in fuzzy governance structures on the occasion of typical scandals, failures and blunders (Bache *et al.* 2015; Hinterleitner 2020; 2019), less is known about blame diffusion patterns during severe crises when governments are called on to consolidate responsibility and assume leadership.

We develop expectations on how blame diffusion patterns – consisting of blame-shifting onto lower-level government units, citizens and experts – look and differ in fuzzy governance structures (the political *courant normal*) and in consolidated governance structures (when citizens widely expect governments to assume responsibility for a crisis). We test our theoretical argument with a within-unit longitudinal study of the blame diffusion patterns of the Swiss Federal Council (FC) during press conferences held in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The period under analysis (March – December 2020) is divided into three distinct phases characterised by different governance structures due to the FC's enactment of emergency law.

The analysis reveals that blame diffusion patterns vary considerably between the three phases. The FC blames lower-level government units (i.e. cantons) more frequently and explicitly when governance structures are fuzzy than when they are consolidated. Moreover, it blames citizens (and to a lesser degree, experts) more frequently and explicitly when governance structures are consolidated. In other words, during severe

crises, blame spills out of the political system once it becomes more difficult to shift blame onto other actors *within* the political system. The finding that the government increasingly shifts blame and responsibility onto its citizens at a time when the latter demand leadership could have far-reaching implications for our understanding of democratic governance in ‘hard’ times. Governments that offload responsibility onto their citizens during crises may foment public frustration and disaffection with democracy, but they may also more strongly (re)involve them into politics.

Our study contributes to the literature in several ways. First, we provide important new insights into the politics of blame during extraordinary times by showing how governments’ blame diffusion patterns change in response to the more consolidated governance structures that often characterise periods of large-scale prolonged crises. Second, we theoretically advance the blame avoidance literature by systematically examining citizens and experts as blame targets (Dowding 2020; Flinders and Dimova 2020) and by adapting existing categorizations of blame avoidance strategies to situations marked by large-scale prolonged crises (Hinterleitner and Sager 2017; Hood 2011). Finally, we provide a systematic empirical test of our argument by employing and complementing the approach pioneered by Kriegmair *et al.* (2022; see also Heinkelmann-Wild *et al.* 2021), which allows us to comprehensively capture blame diffusion patterns and how they change over time.

The article is structured as follows. The first section reviews the literature on institutions’ impact on governmental blame avoidance and suggests that we know little about blame-shifting in situations where the institutional context does not favour the use of this political strategy. The second section formulates expectations on how blame diffusion patterns change when the political *courant normal* gives way to a large-scale, prolonged crisis. The third section presents the research design and data, and the fourth section reports on and interprets the empirical results. The final section concludes the analysis and speculates on the implications of this article’s findings for governance and democracy under pressure.

## Literature review and research gap

Research on blame avoidance shows that institutions can impede or boost blame-shifting opportunities (for a comprehensive overview, see de Ruiter and Kuipers 2021). This research usually treats governments as objectively rational actors who react regularly and reasonably to institutional constraints (Hinterleitner 2020). Put simply, governments that have both a preference and the opportunity for blame avoidance in a given institutional context can be expected to choose the blame avoidance approach

that promises to be the most successful in that context (Heinkelmann-Wild and Zangl 2020).

Within the larger group of (in)formal institutions, research particularly focuses on the design of governance structures and the blame diffusion opportunities they provide. As Weaver (1986) argues in his seminal contribution, the degree of decentralisation in a political system influences government actors' ability to shift blame: more blame-shifting opportunities exist in decentralised systems comprised of a wide variety of actors who take part in a political process or policy issue compared with comparatively centralised systems. In federal systems, for example, institutional responsibility is more diffuse than in centralised systems because lower-level government units (federal states, local governments, municipalities, etc.) play a more prominent role in policy design and implementation, which reduces citizens' ability to attribute responsibility to specific levels of government (Cuttler 2004). A complex institutional landscape therefore provides incentives for both riding out a controversial issue (because political responsibility is harder to locate in complex landscapes) and for shifting blame within that landscape (because many scapegoats are available in a complex landscape) (Bache *et al.* 2015; Flinders and Buller 2006).

While we know quite a bit about how governments manage blame during controversies stemming from ordinary failures, blunders, fiascos and crises that 'happen by the dozens in Western democracies – year in, year out' (Hinterleitner 2020: 2), less is known about governments' blame management approach during large-scale, prolonged crises (Boin *et al.* 2020), when governments are called on to protect their citizens from a severe threat (Ansell 2019). Research shows that governments sometimes benefit from a 'rally-round-the-flag' effect during situations framed as crises, bringing citizens to unite behind their government and to support policies that they would otherwise reject (Boin *et al.* 2008; Lupia and Menning 2009; Schlipphak and Treib 2017). However, this effect is unlikely to last during prolonged crises, and it does not usually exonerate governments from engaging in blame avoidance during the 'framing contests' that accompany disruptive emergencies (Boin *et al.* 2009a).

Moreover, the 'tried and true' strategies that governments frequently employ to avoid blame for 'normal' incidents, such as kicking a controversy into the long grass (Hood *et al.* 2009), confidently shrugging off responsibility for an incident, or reframing it as much less severe than insinuated by critics (Brändström and Kuipers 2003), are less likely to be credible during large-scale prolonged crises that directly affect many citizens (Hinterleitner 2020). Unlike most policy controversies and political scandals, large-scale prolonged crises are 'proximate' to citizens, i.e. they exist 'as a tangible presence affecting people's lives in immediate, concrete

ways' (Hinterleitner 2018; Soss and Schram 2007: 121). Citizens thus directly feel the repercussions of crisis-related decisions; an aspect that exposes governments to increased public scrutiny. Moreover, many political systems have devised emergency laws that consolidate responsibility at the top during crisis situations. For example, many countries have emergency response systems in place that are activated when local governments – as the often most under-resourced and least powerful in federal systems – are overwhelmed by a crisis situation (Downey and Myers 2020). Taken together, these developments consolidate the 'fuzzy' governance structures that characterise many political systems during normal times, thereby depriving governments of a self-defence mechanism when 'faced with apparently intractable socio-political challenges' (Bache *et al.* 2015: 65).

Large-scale, prolonged crises are thus characterised by a peculiar accountability context (Bovens 2007) whose impact on governments' blame avoidance approach awaits systematic mapping. This article aims to make an important step in this direction by comparing crisis-related blame diffusion patterns in institutional contexts where accountability is 'fuzzy' (i.e. distributed among a variety of political actors) and in contexts where it is 'consolidated' (i.e. concentrated in the hands of the executive government). The next section presents our theoretical expectations on how blame diffusion patterns can be expected to change when the sheer gravity and duration of a crisis forces governments to assume responsibility for crisis management.

## Theory

The literature on blame avoidance suggests that political actors prefer opportunities that counter voter disapproval (blame-avoiding) rather than opportunities that encourage voter approval (credit-claiming) because voters pay more attention to negative information than positive information and are more sensitive to losses than to gains (Weaver 1986). During crisis situations, which produce a lot of negative information and (potential) losses, this calculation can be expected to be particularly pronounced. While one may expect that severe crises that require the use of emergency powers may provide executive politicians with an opportunity to credit claim as 'strong leaders', we deem this unlikely to exonerate them from occasionally avoiding blame due to the previously outlined 'proximity' of these crises. Severe crises include decision-making situations that put governments under intense political, media and public pressure (Boin *et al.* 2009b). Crises force governments to make tough decisions under a great deal of time pressure and under high levels of uncertainty; decisions that are unlikely to please everyone and that therefore almost unavoidably attract blame from different factions of society.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, governments frequently had to weigh decisions that appeared reasonable from a public health perspective against those that appeared to be good for the economy but which would very likely have severe effects on people's health and life. Blame avoidance can therefore be considered as an important part of a government's response to large-scale prolonged crises – next to other aspects such as occasional credit claiming, informing and bolstering the public, making concrete crisis-related decisions and engaging in off-stage negotiations with involved actors. In fact, by helping to protect one's public reputation and legitimacy, blame avoidance can be considered as an important 'enabling' factor for preserving the government's agency during prolonged crises (Moynihan 2012).

In order to protect themselves from reputation-damaging blame, governments can employ a variety of blame avoidance strategies (Hinterleitner 2020; Hood 2011; Weaver 1986). In a crisis situation, governments mainly employ *presentational* strategies, i.e. they aim to portray their actions and the crisis situation in a more positive light while shifting responsibility and blame to others (Hood 2011). During large-scale prolonged crises, governments can be expected to not only shift responsibility for harms or losses that have already materialised, but also to shift responsibility for harms or losses that may occur in the future. Moreover, during a prolonged crisis, governments need to strike a balance between shifting blame and avoiding offending actors on whose compliance or collaboration they might depend at a later point. Governments can therefore also be expected to shift blame and responsibility in more obscure ways during prolonged crises. We hence go beyond the existing literature (Hinterleitner and Sager 2017; Hood 2011) by assuming that presentational strategies are not only employed in a reactive and overt fashion but also in an anticipatory and more obscure fashion.<sup>2</sup>

The existing literature suggests that national governments routinely shift responsibility and blame to a variety of actors, ranging from lower-level government units such as federal states or public agencies to courts, citizens and experts (e.g. Bache *et al.* 2015; Dowding 2020; Flinders 2020; Heinkelmann-Wild and Zangl 2020; Maestas *et al.* 2008). Of these actors, we believe lower-level government units, citizens and experts to be particularly important during large-scale prolonged crises. Lower-level government units are responsible for crisis-related policy specification and implementation; citizens are important due to the need for widespread public compliance; and experts advise governments on how to navigate the high levels of uncertainty that characterise severe crises. We will discuss each group of potential 'blame-shiftees' (Hood 2002) in turn.

First, with regard to shifting blame onto *lower-level government units*, research suggests that it is more difficult for spectators (interested

citizens, the media, etc.) to assign responsibility for political outcomes in federal systems than in centralised systems because power is dispersed across and shared amongst actors at different levels (Maestas *et al.* 2008). Moreover, as Heinkelmann-Wild and Zangl (2020) have shown in the case of EU migration policies, governments embedded in multi-level governance settings prefer to shift blame onto actors at the other levels of these settings because they are more loyal and interdependent within their own level than across levels. While in the case of EU policies this implies that national governments may decide to shift blame both upwards to EU institutions and downwards to lower-level government units, for national political issues it is only viable to shift blame downwards. While lower-level units may not be responsible for blame-attracting decisions, they are often good blame-shiftees because they are prominently involved in the implementation of these decisions – an activity that has been shown to frequently attract blame (Heinkelmann-Wild and Zangl 2020). Therefore, lower-level units represent ideal ‘lightning rods’ for national governments during crisis situations (Bach and Wegrich 2019).

Second, governments have been shown to increasingly shift responsibility and blame onto *citizens*. Blaming citizens involves re-framing individual-state relationships and follows what Elizabeth Shove (2010) has labelled as ‘the ABC model’. This ABC model frames social change as a matter of personal responsibility and portrays the government as an information provider and as an entity that shapes individuals’ choice architecture to ‘nudge’ them into making ‘good’ decisions. The government’s role in this model is to persuade and advise individuals based on the premise that when given better information and appropriate incentives, individuals (i) will change their attitudes, (ii) alter their behaviour and/or (iii) make choices that better align with addressing social challenges. As Keith Dowding (2020: xii) argues, ‘over the past 50 years, one specific ideological viewpoint has dominated. And that is the cult of personal responsibility.’ What Dowding charts, through a focus on gun crime, obesity, homelessness, gambling and drugs policy, is that governments in the UK and US have pushed ‘the idea that citizens must take responsibility for their own lives and that they are responsible for their own decisions, and hence for their consequences’. Whereas governments in Western democracies once took on a degree of direct responsibility for the health and wealth of all their citizens, there is now a process of what Dowding describes as ‘privatized blame-shifting’.

Third, governments have also been shown to shift responsibility and blame to *scientific and policy experts* who are frequently and prominently involved in policy-making and crisis management (Ingold and Gschwend 2014; Rosenthal and ‘t Hart 1991). For example, during the COVID-19

pandemic, the UK government adopted a technocratic, science-based approach supposed to ensure that no government statement was made without explicitly following the advice of experts (Flinders 2020). Similarly, the governments of Turkey and Greece managed to share responsibility and diffuse accountability during the COVID-19 pandemic by presenting experts as policy-makers (Zahariadis *et al.* 2020). ‘Hugging the experts’ (Flinders and Dimova 2020) provides governments with the opportunity to not only justify and defend their decisions but also to shift responsibility for them in case they attract blame. Mavrot (2022) makes a similar argument for the Swiss COVID-19 Science Task Force.

In the following, we formulate expectations on how governments’ blame diffusion patterns – i.e. the distribution of blame-shifting moves onto lower-level government units, citizens and experts – look and differ in fuzzy governance structures compared with consolidated governance structures. We base these expectations on the foundational assumption that governments will carefully weigh the opportunities and costs associated with shifting blame to specific blame-shiftees. Following Hood (2002; 2011), we assume that blame-shiftees are not passive actors but rather that they may initiate a counterattack that results in a ‘blame boomerang’ directed at the government. Therefore, governments can be expected to prefer to shift blame onto blame-shiftees who have comparatively limited power to initiate a reputation-damaging counterattack. In terms of possible counterattacks, experts and citizens are more dangerous actors for governments than lower-level government units. As the principals of elected politicians, citizens<sup>3</sup> have the power to punish them at the next election. Experts, for their part, often possess a reputation that is considerably higher than that of the government (see e.g. Edelman 2020). This difference in credibility increases the likelihood that governments’ blame-shifting moves will backfire when experts push back against them. Experts and citizens can therefore be considered as ‘fallback options’ whom governments only blame if (the easier-to-blame) lower-level government units are ‘out of reach’, i.e. cannot be credibly blamed in a particular institutional context. Following these considerations, in the context of fuzzy governance structures:

Lower-level government units can be expected to receive the most blame, followed by experts and citizens.

On the contrary, in the context of consolidated governance structures:

Lower-level units are expected to receive less blame while experts and citizens are expected to receive comparatively more blame.

The following sections evaluate our expectations using a within-unit longitudinal design.



## Research design

We examine the impact of governance structures on blame diffusion patterns in the case of the Swiss Federal Council (FC), Switzerland's collective executive government consisting of seven federal councillors (or 'ministers'), during the COVID-19 pandemic. Switzerland is a highly decentralised, power-sharing democracy, which makes it an apt venue for studying fuzzy governance structures. While Switzerland's political system is characterised by extensive federalism (Freiburghaus *et al.* 2021), the country's constitution also has a provision that allows the FC to adopt emergency law during crisis situations (Sager and Mavrot 2020). After COVID-19 infection rates began to spike in late February 2020 and as the public health crisis worsened in subsequent weeks, the government enacted a state of emergency on 16 March 2020 (Federal Office of Public Health FOPH 2020b). This *extraordinary situation*, as defined in the Epidemics Act, 'allows the [FC] to order the introduction of uniform measures in all cantons' (Federal Office of Public Health FOPH 2020a). The FC thus centralised important decision-making responsibilities to manage the COVID-19 crisis. After infection rates and the strain on hospitals gradually receded, the FC ended the extraordinary situation on 26 April 2020 at which point the parliament and the cantons gradually regained many of their decision-making competencies.

The FC's intervention serves to divide the examination period (1 March 2020–31 December 2020) into three distinct phases. These phases allow us to employ a within-unit longitudinal design (Gerring 2012: 285–90) that systematically compares blame diffusion patterns across them. Comparisons within the same unit over time are useful for keeping many factors that influence blame diffusion patterns constant while examining the effects of the distinct governance structures employed. These structures were 'fuzzy' in Phases I and III (as the Federal Council only provided 'strategic guidance' but ultimately relied on the cantons to translate this guidance into concrete policy) and consolidated in Phase II (as the cantons were only responsible for implementing the measures centrally devised by the FC).

While the severity of the crisis (in terms of infection rates, hospitalisations, etc.) varied during the examination period, it is unlikely that this affected the *relative share* of blame-shifting directed at a particular group of blame-shiftees because all three groups of blame-shiftees played an important role throughout the entire examination period. While cantons saw their decision-making competencies reduced under emergency law, they continued to play an important part in policy implementation in the Swiss federal system, even during Phase II (Freiburghaus *et al.* 2021). Moreover, the government continuously relied on experts for

decision-making guidance and citizens were required to comply with a host of rules during the entire examination period to keep infection rates at a manageable level. Our within-unit longitudinal design therefore also controls for the potential influence of changes in blame-shiftees' relative importance on blame diffusion patterns.

We analyse selected media conferences held by the FC from March to December 2020. Media conferences provide an unmediated and comprehensive view of the FC's blame avoidance approach during the examination period. During this time, keeping the public directly informed on a regular basis was of the utmost importance during such a large-scale public health crisis. Moreover, this communication was especially important in light of the suspension of sessions in parliament (another venue for the FC to address a wider public) during the enactment of the emergency law.<sup>4</sup> During the media conferences, the FC was asked to address every conceivable issue related to the pandemic. Our focus lies on media conferences where the FC introduced new policies and gave major updates on the pandemic situation, as these represented moments when the FC was under pressure to explain its decisions and faced critical questions. During these media conferences, a minimum of three federal councillors were present to signal that the whole government stood behind the decisions and measures announced.<sup>5</sup> We excluded (often shorter) media conferences where usually only one or two councillors were present and merely informed the public about very detailed developments within their specific departments (see [Table S1](#) in the [supplementary material](#) for a complete list of all the media conferences during the examination period and the reasons behind including/excluding individual conferences). Because the FC decides collegially and communicates with one voice, the statements made by its members are carefully crafted and based on extensive internal deliberation. This implies that blame-shifting is largely based on strategic thinking while it is likely that there is minimal influence of 'knee-jerk', non-strategic thinking. This approach resulted in the coding of seven media conferences and the identification of a total of 172 blame-shifting moves.

As stated in the theory section, we are interested in both more overt and more obscure blame-shifting. We therefore require a rather broad conceptual tool that allows us to also identify more subtle shifts in responsibility. Following Kriegmair *et al.* (2022; see also Heinkelmann-Wild *et al.* 2021), we therefore conceptualise blame-shifting moves as negative public responsibility attributions (PRAs). Negative PRAs consist of an attribution sender (here: the FC), an attribution target (here: cantons, citizens or experts) and an attribution object (here: a negative (future) development, decision or (potential) outcome related to the COVID-19 pandemic for which responsibility is attributed).

In order to obtain a more contextualised understanding of how the FC shifted blame during the examination period, we also analysed the tone of all negative PRAs using a qualitative perspective that specifically focussed on the explicitness of blame-shifting (undisguised/explicit/overt or disguised/obscure/subtle). For example, when the FC claimed that ‘not all citizens have complied with the rules’, we interpreted this as undisguised blame-shifting, as the FC clearly made citizens’ past behaviour responsible for the development of the crisis. On the contrary, when the FC claimed that ‘this crisis needs each and every one of us. Now we need a jolt, then we can overcome this crisis together’, we interpreted this as disguised blame-shifting because the FC indirectly suggested that citizens had to better comply with the social-distancing regulations or otherwise it would not be possible to relax the situation. This analysis allowed us to identify whether specific blame-shiftees were blamed differently depending on which phase the blame occurred (e.g. were cantons blamed differently during and after the emergency law?), and whether there were differences across blame-shiftees (e.g. does blame-shifting onto cantons systematically differ from blame-shifting onto citizens?). The [supplementary material](#) lists all 172 blame-shifting moves and provides information on their explicitness. The direct quotes found in the subsequent sections also appear in the [supplementary material](#).

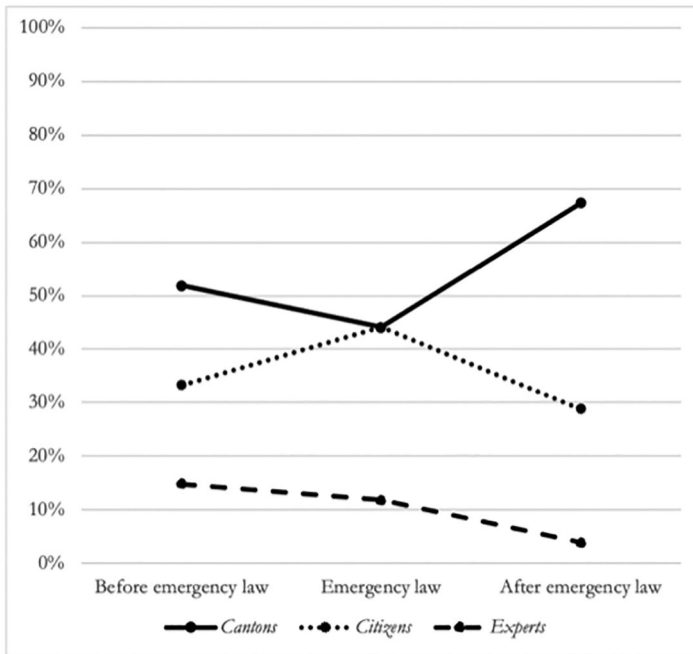
## Empirical analysis

Table 1 shows how the FC shifted blame onto cantons, citizens and experts during the three phases of the examination period. As we are specifically interested in the relative share of blame-shifting received by each category of blame-shiftees in each phase, the subsequent analysis focuses on percentage shares (Table 1, in italics).

As Figure 1 demonstrates, there was a considerable change in the share of blame-shifting that each group received from phase to phase.

**Table 1.** Distribution of blame-shifting moves by the FC during the examination period.

Blame-shiftees	Before emergency law, one media conference [13 March 2021]		During emergency law, four media conferences [16 March 2021; 20 March 2021; 16 April 2021; 22 April 2021]		After emergency law, two media conferences [1 July 2021; 18 December 2021]	
Cantons	14	<i>51.9 %</i>	41	<i>44.1 %</i>	35	<i>67.3 %</i>
Citizens	9	<i>33.3 %</i>	41	<i>44.1 %</i>	15	<i>28.8 %</i>
Experts	4	<i>14.8 %</i>	11	<i>11.8 %</i>	2	<i>3.8 %</i>
Total	27	<i>100 %</i>	93	<i>100 %</i>	52	<i>100 %</i>



**Figure 1.** Relative changes in blame-shifting over time.

### **Blame directed at cantons**

Before the adoption of emergency law, cantons received by far the largest share of blame by the FC (51.9%). This share went down to 44.1% during the enactment of the emergency law and, crucially, jumped back up to 67.3% after the termination of the emergency law. This empirical pattern is firmly in line with our theoretical expectation that lower-level government units receive considerably more blame than citizens and experts when they can be credibly blamed. The fact that cantons received their smallest share of blame by far during Phase II is all the more striking if one considers that this was the most severe phase of the pandemic in Switzerland; and a phase during which the cantons were still responsible for the implementation of the measures adopted by the FC. However, since the share of blame directed at cantons was still very high during the emergency law, we zoom in and qualitatively analyse the differences in the blame-shifting moves directed at cantons between the three phases.

A commonality during all phases was that the FC clearly highlighted the responsibility of the cantons to ‘provide solutions’ and ‘organize themselves’ in the Swiss federal system. However, it shifted responsibility to the cantons more explicitly before and after the enactment of the emergency law when governance structures were fuzzier than in Phase II when they were consolidated. For example, in Phase I, on the occasion

of school closings, the FC stated that the cantons ‘are *strongly* encouraged to provide childcare in this context [emphasis added]’. Asked whether day-care centres should also be closed, it was forthright about the fact that ‘the cantons are responsible for this and can also have a lot of say and regulate this as seems reasonable and take into account the cantonal situation’. In Phase II, the FC struck a subtler tone. Instead of making direct requests to cantons, the FC merely pointed to the cantons’ remaining leeway in the centralised decision-making structure and their responsibility for implementation. For example, it remarked that the ‘ordinance also specifies that the cantons *may* require private clinics and hospitals to make their capacity available to receive patients [emphasis added]’. So, while the FC’s share of blame directed at cantons was still considerable during Phase II, it is clearly visible that consolidated governance structures constrained the FC’s opportunities for shifting blame onto the cantons. Importantly, this changed again in Phase III, when the FC quickly emphasised the cantons’ regained responsibility in managing the crisis: ‘(...) the cantons are *called upon* to see that the protection concepts are actually implemented and they *must* draw consequences if operators or individuals violate rules’. Moreover, it explicitly stated that not all cantons managed the crisis well and did not fully exploit the leeway Swiss federalism provides them with. For instance, towards the end of the year, the FC was clear that it considered some cantons’ crisis management as insufficient: ‘The situation remains critical, which is why the Federal Council decided on stricter measures the week before last and last week and called on the cantons particularly affected to act. Some have reacted, others have hesitated’. Overall, however, the FC emphasised in all phases that the collaboration between cantons, the national level and other actors was important to combat the crisis.

### **Blame directed at citizens**

The numerical changes in blame-shifting moves directed at citizens between the three phases confirm our theoretical expectations. While citizens’ share of blame-shifting moves was 33.3% before the enactment of the emergency law, it went up to 44.1% during emergency law and down to 28.8% after the end of the emergency law. Citizens received considerably more blame when accountability structures were consolidated and when blame-shifting onto cantons was less credible. This pattern confirms our expectation that citizens are primarily a ‘fallback’ option when more attractive blame targets are unavailable.

Interestingly, the FC’s blame-shifting moves directed at citizens were much more subtle overall than those directed at cantons. The FC repeatedly thanked citizens for their ‘cooperation’ and ‘compliance’ with the

measures and never tired of stressing the importance of individual responsibility and solidarity. Nevertheless, it is important to note that in Phase II the share of blame-shifting directed at citizens not only increased considerably; it also became more explicit. Before enacting the emergency law, the FC merely claimed that it needed the support of all citizens to lower infection numbers, thus indirectly pointing to citizens' responsibility for the future development of the epidemic. For example, the FC remarked that this 'situation challenges each and every one of us. We can help to slow the spread of the virus with the precautions that are already known and the measures that the Federal Council has decided today.' During the enactment of the emergency law, the FC employed a more direct tone, announcing that the voluntary measures adopted would only work if citizens collaborated but that this collaboration did not always occur, thus clearly ascribing rising infection rates to citizens' non-compliance: 'We have noticed that these measures were sometimes difficult to interpret, uneven and insufficiently followed and today we want to call the entire population, all the generations, all the regions of the country to comply and apply the decisions taken by the Federal Council (...).' Moreover, only during the enactment of the emergency law did the FC occasionally replace the more generic 'we' with direct appeals to citizens: 'this is an appeal from the Federal Council to the entire population: keep your distance and maintain hygiene, take these measures seriously'. The FC's approach towards citizens became much more humble and vague following the termination of the emergency law. For example, when asked whether people violating mask wearing rules should be sanctioned, the FC replied that 'there is no provision for anyone to hand out fines or sanctions, but it is a duty for the individual to abide by [the rules]'. Moreover, towards the end of the year, instead of explicitly telling people to stay at home during Christmas, the FC resorted to rather generalist claims again: 'I [councillor Sommaruga] therefore wish – especially in view of the festive season – that we look to each other, that we are there for each other'. Moreover, the FC justified the careful easing of restrictions by emphasising that there needed to be a balance between caution and haste and between restrictions and individual responsibility. It thus only indirectly suggested that its trust in citizens' voluntary compliance was not high enough to abolish all restrictions just yet.

While one could alternatively argue that the more frequent and explicit blaming of citizens during Phase II was simply the result of the greater severity of the crisis during that period, this argument does not account for the *relative* increase in blame-shifting attempts directed at citizens in Phase II nor for the more *subtle* blaming of citizens during Phases I and III. After all, the importance of individual compliance for keeping infection rates in check was a constant during the whole examination

period (which would imply a constant share of blame for citizens during the examination period). Moreover, the FC would have had plenty of opportunities to explicitly blame citizens for negative developments and events (such as various mediated super-spreader events) not only during Phase II but also before and after the enactment of the emergency law (which would imply constant explicitness during the examination period). Finally, it is noteworthy that citizens' share of the blame decreased remarkably after the termination of emergency law even though citizens' self-responsibility became more important after the FC relaxed several measures (such as re-opening stores and schools). We therefore deem it unlikely that the changing severity of the crisis accounts for the observed fluctuations in citizens' blame share during the examination period. Taken together, these 'counterfactual considerations' (Fearon 1991) further strengthen our inference that the differences identified between the phases are primarily due to the changes in governance structures brought about by the enactment of the emergency law (and the associated relative 'attractiveness' of blame-shiftees). Governments prefer not to (explicitly) blame citizens and only do so in institutional contexts where more convenient scapegoats are harder to blame.

### ***Blame directed at experts***

The numerical pattern identified for experts only partly confirms our theoretical expectations. Before the enactment of the emergency law, experts already received a considerable share of blame at 14.8% (however, this is still much less than the share attributed to the cantons). This share slightly dropped to 11.8% while the emergency law was in effect and only decreased greatly once the law ended (3.8%). Hence, while the change in the share of blame from Phase II to Phase III confirms our expectations (i.e. experts are unattractive blame targets that are only blamed if more attractive blame targets are out of reach), the change from Phase I to Phase II does not.

Experts' considerable share of the blame prior to the emergency law can be explained by the utter lack of precedent for responding to the COVID-19 crisis and the very high uncertainty the FC was confronted with during the first weeks of the pandemic, which only gradually receded as more and more knowledge about the pandemic and combating it became available. In fact, during Phase I and II the FC repeatedly stressed that it based all its decisions on input from scientists and experts, thus shifting responsibility for any negative outcomes that might have occurred in the future. For example, regarding the presumed effectiveness of masks, the FC stated in mid-April that: 'I [councillor Berset] know that the matter of masks is a question that interests many, and I must tell you

that since the beginning, the Federal Council has relied – for all the questions that concern this epidemic – on the work of experts and relies on the latest scientific knowledge. Moreover, the FC's tone towards experts was very cordial during Phase I and II: 'It is good to know that we can count on so many competent, highly committed professionals who care about our well-being, our health and our economy'. Experts only visibly lost their role as prominent (potential) scapegoats in Phase III when the FC began to argue that input from experts was only part of the puzzle of figuring out what to do: 'It is also a matter of political feasibility and when we make decisions, we have to make the synthesis with the opinions of the experts. But the experts don't decide on measures, we do (...)'. The fact that these comments risked reputation-damaging blame boomerangs somewhat contradicts our theoretical expectation that governments try to be more lenient with powerful blame-shiftees.<sup>6</sup> While beyond the scope of this article, these ambiguous comments may have to do with the trade-offs involved in distributing blame between two equally unattractive groups of blame-shiftees. After all, the Science Task Force, made up of prominent Swiss scientists and experts, continued to advocate for tighter restrictions even as public support for them was already waning (Sotomo 2020). The differing opinions of the Science Task Force and the public put the FC in the uncomfortable position of being unable to avoid attracting blame from either experts or from the citizenry. Risking blame boomerangs from experts may have thus been the price to pay for keeping the public 'on board' during the crisis.

Overall, our analysis identifies significant differences in the blame-shifting directed at each of the three groups of blame-shiftees. The FC blamed the cantons for the decisions they made and their implementation of measures ('take the right decisions and do as we tell you'),<sup>7</sup> indirectly shifted blame onto citizens through appeals and hidden threats ('we need you here but it's your own fault if it doesn't work out') and used experts to back up and justify its decisions ('we base our decisions on your input and it's obviously your fault if they turn out to be wrong'). There are also interesting within-group differences across phases. The FC blamed cantons more (explicitly) before and after the emergency law rather than during it. It blamed citizens more (explicitly) during the emergency law than before and after it, and it blamed experts more (explicitly) before and during the emergency law than after it. With the (easy-to-explain) exception of experts in Phase I, these across-group and within-group differences are overall very much in line with our theoretical expectations. While the FC clearly distributed responsibility and blame to all three groups of blame-shiftees during the entire examination period, the analysis suggests that it preferred to blame cantons when they could more easily be blamed as important actors in the political chain of



command, and only reluctantly (and more carefully) directed its blame-shifting at citizens and experts when consolidated governance structures made wholehearted blame-shifting to cantons less credible.

## Conclusions

During large-scale, prolonged crises governments are under increased pressure to become active and protect their citizens against threats. This article examined whether and how a severe crisis affects governments' blame management approach when they are called on to consolidate responsibility and assume leadership. Based on a longitudinal study of the Swiss Federal Council's (FC) blame diffusion patterns during the COVID-19 pandemic, we showed that the government certainly did not stop shifting blame even during the enactment of the emergency law, when governance structures were more consolidated and lower-level government units were therefore harder to blame. However, the government adapted its blame diffusion patterns following changes in the institutional context. Our most important finding is that citizens (and to a lesser degree, experts) were more frequently and explicitly blamed when consolidated governance structures made wholehearted blame-shifting onto lower-level government units appear less credible. Put differently, blame spills out of the political system and directly affects society once blame-shifting onto other actors *within* the political system becomes more difficult.

These findings, of course, derive from the analysis of a single case and more research is needed to assess their validity in other crisis- and country-contexts. Leong and Howlett (2017), for example, suggested complementing research on executive politics, instrumental assumptions and institutional analyses with an analysis of how the broader socio-political context and cultural dynamics influence the assignment of blame (and credit). Applied to the present research context, this could imply comparing governments' blame-shifting 'styles' across cultural contexts. Switzerland, for its part, is known for its polite forms of behaviour that also extend to the political realm, and one may expect that this is one of the reasons why the blame-shifting identified in this article are generally more subtle (Sager and Mavrot 2020). In other countries, the blaming of citizens, for example, might be more overt (see Dowding 2020). Moreover, both the nature of the crisis governments are called on to address and the configuration of the political system may also influence blame diffusion patterns irrespective of the configuration of governance structures. For example, experts may be blamed more frequently and explicitly during crises in which politicians do not depend on them as much as they did during the COVID-19 pandemic. Or, public

agencies and courts may be more prominent blame-shiftees in other political systems while local governments might play a subordinate role. In any case, it is important to note that the systematic identification of blame diffusion patterns presented in this article only captures one aspect of a government's crisis management approach and more could be learned by analysing and interpreting interactions with other aspects such as off-stage negotiations or the reassurance of citizens. For example, we realised that the FC very often 'sugar-coated' its blame-shifting directed at citizens by combining it with encouragement and moral pressure. While this aspect complicated the coding of individual PRAs as 'explicit' or 'disguised', the further analysis of nuances in blame-shifting might also reveal new insights into the discursive relationships between the government and the governed during prolonged crises. Finally, our analysis concentrated on the institutional determinants of blame diffusion patterns, leaving it to future research to systematically analyse the success prospects of these patterns.

With these limitations in mind, we emphasise the startling finding that when the government comes under pressure to exert leadership and address large-scale prolonged crises, it reacts by increasingly shifting blame and responsibility onto its citizens. This finding could have far-reaching implications in a world in which governments confront a multitude of severe and difficult-to-address crises (economic, migration, climate, public health crises, etc.). On the one hand, a government that blames its citizens instead of protecting them from threats is likely to exacerbate the high levels of frustration and disaffection with democratic politics that currently exist in many countries (Foa and Mounk 2016), thereby driving its citizens into the arms of politicians who pretend to take their grievances seriously (Norris and Inglehart 2018). On the other hand, a government that shifts responsibility to citizens during severe crises may also cause them to become more strongly (re)involved into politics, potentially narrowing the 'void' that separates citizens from their political representatives in many contemporary democracies (Mair 2013). These potential implications are only one reason for why blame avoidance in 'hard times' deserves greater attention.

## Notes

1. 'Souverän ist, wer über den Ausnahmezustand entscheidet'.
2. This assumption goes beyond the existing blame avoidance literature in two ways. First, and contrary to Hood (2011), who suggests that the purpose of blame avoidance strategies is to downplay and distance oneself from things that went wrong, we explicitly theorize that this logic also applies to not-yet-materialized losses/harms. Second, and contrary to

Hinterleitner and Sager (2017), who suggest that presentational strategies are primarily applied in a reactive fashion (while only agency and policy strategies are applied in an anticipatory fashion), we propose that presentational strategies can also serve to distance oneself from a blameworthy event that might happen in the future.

3. As, for example, Ronald Reagan's frequent labelling of disadvantaged women as 'welfare queens' suggests, governments may decide to blame only specific – and often weaker – parts of the population. This approach significantly reduces the probability that there will be a reputation-damaging counterattack. However, this type of targeted blaming should be less relevant during large-scale crisis situations when large parts of the citizenry are expected to comply.
4. See <https://www.parlament.ch/press-releases/Pages/mm-vd-2020-03-15.aspx?lang=1033> (accessed 1 March 2022).
5. Usually Alain Berset (Head of the Department of Home Affairs), Ueli Maurer (Head of the Department of Finance), Guy Parmelin (Head of the Department of Economic Affairs, Education and Research) and Simonetta Sommaruga (Head of the Department of the Environment, Transport, Energy and Communications and elected President of the Swiss Confederation (or 'head of ministers') during 2020).
6. Blame boomerangs did eventually occur when prominent scientists resigned from the Swiss National COVID-19 Science Task Force (an interdisciplinary expert panel formed in March 2020) 'in protest' of the FC's decisions. See, e.g., <https://www.srf.ch/news/schweiz/ruecktritt-aus-corona-taskforce-in-der-schweiz-wird-oft-laviert-das-frustriert-die-experten> (accessed 1 March 2022).
7. These are stylized slogans intended to summarize the essence of the FC's blame-shifting onto a particular group of blame-shiftees.

## Disclosure statement

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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