

BLAME AVOIDANCE IN PUBLIC POLICY

MARKUS HINTERLEITNER

IDHEAP, University of Lausanne, Switzerland

markus.hinterleitner@unil.ch

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Central definition

Blame avoidance describes the activities public officeholders engage in to downplay or distance themselves from (potentially) blame-attracting and goal-threatening events, such as policy controversies or political scandals.

What is blame avoidance?

With his seminal article, “The Politics of Blame Avoidance,” Weaver (1986) kicked off the scientific study of the phenomenon of blame avoidance and provided first insights into its determinants and its consequences. Drawing on findings from early prospect theory, Weaver ascribed the existence of blame avoidance in the political sphere to the loss aversion of public officeholders and their consideration of the negativity bias of citizens — i.e., people’s propensity to pay more attention to negative information than positive information. For officeholders, losses interfere with the goals that they strive to achieve and aim to protect when pursuing a career in public service, such as their office, their policy agenda, or their political legacy (Hinterleitner and Sager 2017).

The inherent aversion to losses and desire to safeguard goals threatened by blame lead politicians to apply different *blame avoidance strategies*, which range from argumentative tactics, like reframing an issue or deflecting responsibility, to more substantial strategies such as appointing an inquiry or redesigning governance arrangements. The literature analyzes forms of blame avoidance in a wide variety of domestic, international, and multi-level contexts and has developed a considerable range of categorizations of blame avoidance strategies. Of these, Hood's (2011) distinction between agency strategies, policy strategies and presentational strategies is the most comprehensive. *Agency strategies* seek to shift the risk of being blamed to others by allocating formal responsibility and competencies in ways that allow for blame deflection and blame diffusion. Typical examples of agency strategies include the delegation of blame-attracting activities or the placement of other actors at the front-line. *Policy strategies* aim to (re)design policies so that they are less likely to attract blame. Political actors can try to make policies less blameworthy by choosing between different policy designs, by changing the substance of a policy issue or by manipulating the procedures through which a policy is adopted. Finally, *presentational strategies* concern the presentation of government actions or policy outcomes. Presentational strategies aim to avoid or limit blame by shaping public perceptions and controlling the debate about a policy issue. Presentational strategies involve offering justifications, emphasizing positive aspects while neglecting or relativizing negative aspects, only releasing favorable information about a policy issue, distracting the public or timing a debate about a policy issue.

Overall, research on blame avoidance helps to make sense of how public officeholders act under pressure when their goals and careers are on the line and simultaneously provides insights into the consequences for policy and governance that result from this type of elite behavior. In fact, from its very inception, the concept of blame avoidance was used to explain changes in the design of policies and governance arrangements. Weaver (1986), for example, ascribed the sharp increase in the use of indexing — automatic adjustments for inflation — in US federal programs in the 1970s and 1980s to politicians' blame-avoidance

considerations. Fearing criticism from fiscal conservatives, politicians deliberately gave up the opportunity to claim credit for popular increases in benefits during times of high inflation and employed automated decisions instead. In recent years, many contributions have been added to the research base and blame avoidance has turned into an indispensable tool in the study of how (often-conflictual) “politics” make “public policy.”

Factors determining the amount and allocation of blame

For blame to develop on the occasion of a controversial event or development, two things need to come together: a widely shared perception of loss or harm and a perceived responsibility for the loss or harm (Hood 2011). That is, perceptions of loss/harm only develop into target-oriented blame if they can be attributed to some entity. While perceived loss/harm depends primarily on the *severity of the controversial event* or development in question, its attributability is conditioned by *the shape of political institutions*.

As a general rule, the more severe an issue is and the more this issue is perceived to affect people, the more blame politicians (usually those in the opposition), the media and the public will generate. The reason is that the public cares about political issues in differentiated ways and to varying degrees. Since the analysis of political information is costly, people usually only spend a little time forming an opinion on (potentially) controversial events and developments. Whether a specific issue catches their attention largely depends on the *salience* of the issue and its *proximity* to mass publics (Hinterleitner 2020). Issues are salient if they are particularly severe or novel, or because they touch on values that many citizens hold dear (Brändström and Kuipers 2003). Moreover, issues are proximate if their repercussions evidently affect a great many citizens, such as pandemics or food scandals. Because salience triggers emotions and proximity triggers considerations of self-interest, events and developments that possess these interpretive characteristics are likely to trigger more blame than issues that lack these characteristics.

However, whether the blame created by politicians, media actors and the public (primarily through social media but also through demonstrations and other forms of political activity) develops into a “political force” that potentially affects political careers or the trajectory of policies depends primarily on *political institutions*. Institutions, from the structure of party competition to the configuration of governance arrangements to conventions of responsibility and resignation, can be conceptualized as “blame channelers” that help to diffuse blame or to concentrate it in one spot (Hinterleitner 2022). In federal systems, for example, institutions channel blame away from the central government because lower-level government units (federal states, local governments, municipalities, etc.) play a more prominent role in policy design and implementation than in centralized systems — an institutional set-up that not only diffuses blame but also reduces citizens’ ability to attribute responsibility to specific levels of government. Governments can thus more effectively diffuse blame in fuzzy governance structures on the occasion of political scandals and policy controversies than in consolidated governance structures where responsibility for adverse developments and outcomes can be more easily assigned (Bache et al. 2015). Political officeholders that are well-protected because institutions channel blame away from them have little incentive to act in response to blame while officeholders exposed to concentrated blame pressure are more willing to do so. Political institutions thus determine whether blame puts officeholders under pressure to act.

Forms of blame avoidance and their relevance for public policy

In democracies, blame can emerge on the occasion of a diverse range of controversial events. These include cases of private misconduct (e.g., corruption), situations where a government is unable to confront exogenous threats (e.g., terrorist attacks), economically painful developments (e.g., inflation), and of course, all kinds of policy controversies — from failed infrastructure projects to food scandals, security issues, and flawed policy reforms. Policy controversies are particularly relevant for students and scholars of public policy because they happen by the dozens in modern democracies. With governments steadily *broadening* and *deepening* their reach into society, policies accumulate (Adam et

al., 2019). Increased policy activity quite logically implies that a greater number of governmental interventions will not work out as planned, thus triggering controversies. As Bovens and 't Hart (2016, p. 654) have put it, only “a part of this myriad of ambitions and activities unfolds as hoped, expected and planned for by policymakers. Another part throws up surprises, complications, delays, disappointments and unintended consequences.”

When opposition actors or the media pick up on a controversy, it develops into a political *blame game*. Blame games are series of interactions between blame makers and blame takers on the occasion of a controversial issue, and they constitute a peculiar subset of political contestation (Hinterleitner 2020; Hood 2011). For opposition actors, a blame game about a policy controversy is an occasion to damage the reputation of the government and to bend the course of policy according to their interests. Opposition actors will direct blame at responsible officeholders by highlighting (and possibly exaggerating) the supposed damage revealed by the controversy and officeholders' responsibility for it.

When blame pressure is high enough, responsible officeholders will engage in what the literature calls *reactive blame avoidance* (Hinterleitner and Sager 2017) in order to protect their goals and reputation. Reactive blame avoidance includes the outright deflection of blame onto other actors, the reframing of a controversy by downplaying it or emphasizing positive aspects, but also “policy responses”, i.e., the adaptation of a policy in response to blame pressure. The spectrum of possible policy responses typically ranges from quick fixes and cosmetic changes to major policy change. Blame games may thus represent mere hiccups in the trajectory of policies but may also significantly alter them.

Blame games in democracies are usually a public affair. Since the politicians playing the blame game seek to pull people on their side, they are eager to take public preferences and reactions into account. This is why blame games have been portrayed as “venues of democratic responsiveness,” i.e., as opportunities for citizens to directly influence the shape of public policies (Hinterleitner 2022). Overall, the study of blame games, as well as the

reactive forms of blame avoidance that can be observed during their unfolding, can help to understand policy change during more conflictual political periods, when political systems “heat up” to address controversial events and developments.

However, since most politicians are savvy, they also try to prevent potentially blameworthy policy developments from occurring in the first place. The literature captures these behaviors under the rubric of *anticipatory blame avoidance* (Hinterleitner and Sager 2017). This form of blame avoidance includes behaviors such as the delegation of responsibility to distance oneself from potentially contentious developments, the creation of fuzzy governance structures to exacerbate the assignment of responsibility and blame, or the drafting of legislation intended to remove executive discretion (such as the previously-described indexing provisions). Anticipatory blame avoidance is relevant for the study of public policy because it may lead to more risk-averse policies and to the creation of governance arrangements in which responsibility does not primarily lie with the political executive but is shifted to and distributed among lower-level government units and semi-public and private actors (Bache et al. 2015).

To summarize, while reactive blame avoidance is about the public confrontation of blame, anticipatory blame avoidance aims to keep a potentially blameworthy event off the agenda and to prepare for blameworthy events. Both forms of blame avoidance have important implications for public policy. *Anticipatory blame avoidance* primarily affects institutional and policy design and may translate into blame-diffusing, yet ineffective, governance arrangements. For example, a governance arrangement involving many actors may allow for the diffusion of responsibility in the case of adverse outcomes. However, doing so may simultaneously make adverse outcomes more likely because information-sharing and goal-oriented decision-making become more complicated. *Reactive blame avoidance* primarily affects policy change during contentious times when political officeholders alter the course of public policies in response to pressure. To name but one example, if a blame game reveals major flaws in a country’s military procurement policy, blame pressure may force

the government to confront these flaws by substantially reforming the procurement policy (Hinterleitner 2020).

There are distinct challenges for research that aims to explore the policy consequences of anticipatory and reactive forms of blame avoidance. Research on anticipatory blame avoidance starts at a disadvantage because it is less visible and thus more difficult to observe than reactive blame avoidance. As blame games largely play out in the open, studies on reactive forms of blame avoidance can directly examine actor behavior, for example by analyzing the news coverage of blame games, transcripts of parliamentary debates, or social media interactions. Indeed, such analyses have already yielded important insights into the factors that trigger various forms of reactive blame avoidance and into their distinct policy consequences (Hinterleitner 2020). Identifying the employment and effects of anticipatory blame avoidance strategies is more difficult because their application occurs significantly before they come into effect, i.e., before they “work” in the interest of officeholders. Research thus needs to show that at some point in time, officeholders were aware of a future threat and began to intentionally prepare for it and to simultaneously rule out alternative explanations for the existence of blame-avoiding governance arrangements or policy design aspects. In other words, research on anticipatory blame avoidance needs to contend with the fact that not everything that serves a blame avoidance purpose was initially contrived for that purpose.

Future directions in the study of blame avoidance

The study of blame-based politics in general, and forms of blame avoidance in particular, is very much in flux. Novel contributions are being made regularly, not in the least because blame is an increasingly important feature of the more conflictual politics that can be observed in almost all contemporary democracies. In fact, the changing nature of democratic politics, with its more contentious elements such as deepening polarization or the more widespread application of populist techniques, challenge the study of blame avoidance in important respects.

First, political institutions, which determine the allocation of blame and officeholders' possibilities to dodge it, are currently changing in response to conflictual politics. Cases of democratic backsliding, which have been documented in many democracies, highlight the changing influence of political norms and conventions (understood here as "informal" institutions) on politics (Hinterleitner and Sager 2022). This is relevant for existing research, which claims that conventions of responsibility and resignation influence the course of blame games in distinct ways. If officeholders ignore democratic conventions and no longer resign in the face of even the greatest blame pressure, then the existing research base needs to question and potentially revise its assumptions on how institutions influence blame games.

Second, research on blame avoidance usually builds on the foundational assumption that (i) "blame is bad" for officeholders and therefore (ii) officeholders will generally emphasize blame-avoidance behaviors ahead of credit-claiming ones. However, as the unconventional and provocative actions and statements of figures like Donald Trump, Boris Johnson or Jair Bolsonaro suggest, politicians do not always seek to avoid blame; they sometimes deliberately set out to *be blamed*. Breaking the rules, being provocative, rejecting etiquette, displaying bad manners, telling inappropriate jokes, repeating inaccurate statements, or threatening to break the law or constitutional conventions seems to be a performative strategy for demonstrating their difference and claiming authenticity in political settings characterized by polarization and democratic disaffection (Flinders and Hinterleitner 2022). However, the consequences and implications of *blame-seeking* have not yet been explored in detail. As these examples suggest, future research on blame avoidance and related phenomena is poised to make important contributions to our understanding of politics and policy-making in more conflictual times.

Cross references

Adversarial Legalism

Governance in Public Policy

Policy Change

Policy Process

Policy outcomes

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