Avoiding Blame in Policy Crises in Different Institutional Settings
Minou De Ruiter, School of Governance, Utrecht University and Sanneke Kuipers, Institute of Security and Global Affairs, Leiden University

https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.1592
Published online: 23 March 2022

Summary
Policy crises often lead to “framing contests,” in which officeholders, opponents, media, and the public at large aim to interpret the crisis in question, explain its cause, attribute responsibility, and agree on ways to address harm caused. More often than not, these contests turn into blame games for the incumbent officeholder. Formal and informal institutional factors can shape blame avoidance options of officeholders, and influence the outcomes of these crisis-induced blame games in terms of blame escalation, policy responses, and political sanctions.

First, formal institutions shape officeholders’ incentives for arguing that they are not responsible for the crisis or should not be punished for its occurrence. Studies in the field of welfare state retrenchment and ministerial resignations have analyzed the blame avoidance options of governments and the survival rates of officeholders in various institutional settings. These studies have provided evidence that institutional complexity and policy-making authority help explaining pathways of blame management. In single-party governments, the accountability chain is more clear and prime ministers have a stronger electoral incentive to sack failing and unpopular ministers. However, a more restrictive interpretation of formal ministerial responsibility for administrative or implementation failures, along with the delegation of policy execution to agencies at arm’s length, can work as a protective shield in blame games for the officeholders and reinforce policy inertia. Consociational systems with multiparty coalitions often show an opposite effect.

Second, institutionalized norms, also known as “the way we do things around here,” affect blame avoidance behavior available to officeholders. Studies which have taken “cultural-institutional” approaches to accountability studies have shown that informal accountability actors, fora, and norms about appropriate behavior shape blame processes. Actors in consociational systems with multiparty coalitions often consider consensus-oriented and nonconfrontational behavior, such as attempts to appease the opposition with policy reparations, as more appropriate responses to blame than those in systems with more elite polarization. In addition, officeholders are increasingly held to account by actors who solely have an informal role in blame games, such as the media and interest groups. Therefore, the extent of mediatization and increased polarization plays a major role in how different political contexts “process” blame.

Third, other relevant noninstitutional factors for blame avoidance behavior are important, such as the nature and timing of the crisis and involvement of other actors in the blame game. Issue salience and proximity affect the potential for blame escalations and the options for blame management by both office holders and their opponents. Prior reputation of incumbent politicians helps them to draw on leadership capital to deflect blame. If the timing of a blame game coincides with upcoming elections, blame is more likely to escalate and lead to political sanctions.

To further understanding of the role of institutional factors in crisis-induced blames games, future research should focus on blame games where institutions themselves are questioned, contested, or in-flux.
Avoiding Blame in Policy Crises in Different Institutional Settings

**Keywords:** blame avoidance, institutional theory, political accountability, political survival, informal institutions, crisis analysis

**Subjects:** Policy, Administration, and Bureaucracy, Political Behavior, Political Institutions

**Crises and Blame Avoidance: The Role of Institutional Settings**

What gets you off the hook of blame from one cultural starting-point may only dig you into a deeper accountability hole in another setting.

(Hood, 2014, p. 614)

Prison escapes, extensive tax allowance fraud, faulty train projects, deadly flooding, and the failure to evacuate citizens from a foreign war zone. These are just a couple of examples of events covering the gamut of government activities that can turn into alleged policy crises. While incidents occur in every policy area, they can blow up to policy crises when they are framed as “blameworthy violations of crucial public values” (Brändström & Kuipers, 2003). A political drama is often guaranteed when public or political officeholders are caught up in perceived policy crises. Such crises hit the front pages of national newspapers and become leading items in current affairs shows and hotly debated topics in Parliament. Politicians, media, and the public at large engage in “framing contests” which aim to interpret the failure in question, explain its cause, attribute responsibility, and establish policy directions for the future (Boin et al., 2009).

More often than not, questions of blame permeate these contests, turning them into “blame games” (Boin et al., 2009; Brändström & Kuipers, 2003). Ministers, parliamentarians, and journalists have thus likened these contests to blood sports, gladiator battles, and feeding frenzies. Not only can crisis-induced blame games lead to the forced resignation of officeholders, they can threaten the survival of the incumbent government and undermine trust in public authority. On the other hand, blame games can also force governments to change their stance on the policies underpinning the crisis, thus instigating policy reparations and shifts that might otherwise have not occurred.

However, what is considered a blameworthy crisis, who carries responsibility, and what needs to be done to repair the harm is essentially socially constructed. Edelman (1988, p. 31) already pointed out in the 1980s that “the appearance of a crisis is a political act, not a recognition of a fact.” In this sense, blame is not an objective label, but a label that signifies culpability and some “moral sanction which detracts from the ability of that individual to continue to act in the public interest” (Leong & Howlett, 2017, p. 600).

Given that voters react more strongly to alleged negative performance than to “good deeds,” it is not surprising that public officeholders aim to keep their legitimacy by focusing on avoiding blame for perceived crises (Weaver, 1986). Blame attribution combines perceived severity and harm caused with perceived responsibility of an individual or an organization for that harm at any given point in time (Iyengar, 1989; Sulitzeanu-Kenan & Hood, 2005, p. 2). Blame avoidance
behavior is therefore broadly defined as “all kinds of activities [by actors] intended to downplay or distance oneself from (potentially) blame-attracting and goal-threatening events” (Hinterleitner, 2017, p. 243).

Blame avoidance research is focused on explaining how blame games develop and on the efficacy of blame avoiding behavior that political and public leaders employ after policy or political crises (Boin et al., 2009; Brändström & Kuipers, 2003; Hinterleitner & Sager, 2015; Hood, 2011). Blame avoidance research encompasses a wide range of research fields such as public policy, public administration, and organization studies, branching out into specialized subfields such as crisis communication, corporate apologia, and impression management (Benoit, 1995; Coombs, 2007; Hearit, 2006; Stapleton & Hargie, 2011).

Scholars have produced expanding typologies for blame avoidance behavior of officeholders (Hinterleitner, 2017; Hinterleitner & Sager, 2017). Most overviews agree that actors’ tactics in general vary from a defensive to an accommodative stance (cf. Bovens et al., 1999; Coombs, 2007; Resodihardjo et al., 2016). Political executives have to choose between more defensive stances, such as problem denial and attacking their opponents, and more accommodative stances, such as apologies and offers of policy change. The most influential hypothesis (Hinterleitner, 2017) for how actors react in blame games is the “staged retreat” (Brändström & Kuipers, 2003; Hood et al., 2009, 2016; Resodihardjo et al., 2016; Schütz, 1996). This hypothesis contends that actors under fire will each time choose the more defensive, blame denial options first, before they move towards more blame admitting stances. Actors will opt only for accommodative tactics to admit harm caused and/or responsibility for the event, along with reparative policy changes, if they are forced to do so due to blame heat (Hood et al., 2009, 2016). A graphical representation of blame games and the staged retreat can be seen in Figure 1.

**Figure 1.** Blame games and “staged retreat” decisions.
However, studies have found mixed results for the hypothesis that officeholders follow a staged retreat. While Hood and others (2016, p. 558) found similar staged responses in how officeholders dealt with blame in a comparative study of four blame games in different (Westminster and a presidential) political systems, staged retreat did not take place in other studies (Hearit, 2006; Hood et al., 2009; Resodihardjo et al., 2016). Resodihardjo and others (2016, p. 362) concluded in their study on a local festival gone badly wrong that the institutional context made it impossible for the main officeholder, a mayor, to move towards a more accommodative stance. However, the behavioral focus in blame avoidance studies tends to neglect the institutional and political-cultural (macro) context in which blame avoidance behavior is situated (Hinterleitner & Sager, 2015; Resodihardjo et al., 2016). Hood thus argued that “the more challenging questions about both accountability and blame avoidance concern the way such processes and outcomes are shaped by variations in culture and attitudes” (2014, p. 612).

As long as context is underappreciated, we cannot explain “why actors behave in certain ways in specific situations and environments, and which outcomes their behavior effectively produces” (Hinterleitner & Sager, 2015, p. 141). While blame processes can seem arbitrary, specific pathways and dynamics of accountability are pervasive in blame games (Boin et al., 2009; Brändström & Kuipers, 2003). Blaming and blame avoidance are shaped by both formal institutional arrangements that govern accountability relations between actors and by institutionalized social and political norms regarding appropriate behavior and the role of those actors in crisis-induced blame games (Leong & Howlett, 2017). Institutional factors can therefore be considered as “rules of the game” for those involved (Hinterleitner, 2020, p. 7):

1. influencing which actors have a role in blame games;
2. structuring the “blame barriers” available for officeholders;
3. allocating power opponents have in blaming officeholders effectively.

During blame games, formal institutional factors thus act both as impetus and constraints for political actors and guide them towards choosing certain responses over others (Weaver & Rockman, 1993). Therefore, this article discusses how formal and informal institutions affect blame avoidance behavior of officeholders and how they influence the process and outcome of blame games.

Both formal and informal factors can shape blame avoidance options of officeholders and influence the outcomes of those blame games in terms of blame escalation and political sanctions. First, formal institutions shape officeholders’ incentives for arguing that they are not responsible for the crisis or should not be punished for its occurrence. Studies in the field of welfare state retrenchment and ministerial resignations have analyzed the blame avoidance options of governments and the survival rates of officeholders in various institutional settings. Second, institutionalized norms, also known as “the way we do things around here,” affect blame avoidance behavior available to officeholders. Studies which have taken “cultural–institutional” approaches to accountability studies have focused on how informal accountability actors, fora,
and norms about appropriate behavior shape blame processes. Third, other noninstitutional factors can influence blame avoidance behavior, such as the nature and timing of the crisis and involvement of other actors in the blame game. The article ends with a conclusion on the role of formal and informal institutional settings in crisis-induced blame games and proposes areas for further research.

**Blame Avoidance and Institutional Settings**

Weaver (1986) was the first to discuss how institutions shape blame avoidance of actors under the umbrella term “political system.” Blame avoidance behavior within political systems can be proactive, or reactive. While institutional factors might shape reactive blame avoidance, preemptive blame avoiding behavior of actors can shape institutions in turn. For example, when officeholders and public service organizations anticipate that certain tasks might lead to reputation damage, they prepare how to preemptively avoid blame in different ways (Hinterleitner & Sager, 2017; McGraw, 1990). They can proactively try to minimize their responsibility for certain tasks, or make certain tasks seem less blameworthy with extensive regulations (Maor et al., 2013).

This article will focus on reactive blame avoidance behavior in response to crises that gave rise to calls for public accountability. During a policy crisis, officeholders and organizations can only respond to allegations of blame within the institutional setting they find themselves in. Therefore, this article considers institutional factors as something that officeholders must take as a given when forced to respond to a potential blameworthy crisis (Hinterleitner, 2020, p. 22).

**Formal Institutional Factors: Institutional Complexity and Policy-Making Involvement**

According to studies on policy retrenchment, two interrelated factors influence officeholders’ opportunities to pursue blame avoidance: institutional complexity and policy-making authority (Rittberger et al., 2017). One of the main institutional factors affecting blame avoidance is the clarity of political responsibility and subsequent accountability for certain policies (Maestas et al., 2008; Pal & Weaver, 2003; Pierson, 1994, 1996; Starke, 2006). The “clarity of responsibility” thesis holds that when political institutions concentrate policy-making authority and responsibility on a few actors, this will also concentrate blame (Anderson, 2007; Powell & Whitten, 1993). In “fragmented systems,” blame can more easily be shared among or shifted between multiple actors (Hinterleitner, 2020; Hinterleitner & Sager, 2015). Institutional complexity plays a role both within government levels and between levels (Hooghe & Marks, 2003).
Institutional Accountability: The “Corrective Effect” in Single-Party Governments

Officeholders’ actions are both restrained and enabled by the formal accountability regime in which they work (Woodhouse, 1994, pp. 27–39). National institutional contexts, such as government composition, structure these formal accountability processes (Bovens, 2007; Reichersdorfer et al., 2013). At the central level, studies on ministerial survival and political accountability have revealed the role of responsibility clarity in blame games. Differences in government composition affect the clarity of responsibility for certain policies and thereby enable principals to hold officeholders accountable and fire them for wrongdoing (Budge, 1985; Dowding & Dumont, 2008; Huber & Martinez-Gallardo, 2008; Weaver & Rockman, 1993). Such studies often start from the principal–agent notion that parliamentary democracies contain a “single chain of accountability.” In this chain, the ministerial department is accountable to the minister, the minister to the prime minister, the prime minister to Parliament, and parliamentarians are electorally accountable to voters (Strøm, 2000, p. 269; Strøm et al., 2003).

Coalition and single-party majority governments differ both in terms of incentives to blame an individual minister and in the prime minister’s actual power to sack ministers (Dowding & Dumont, 2008; Huber & Martinez-Gallardo, 2008). Single-party governments have more clear and effective accountability chains than coalition governments (Fischer et al., 2012, p. 516). As visualized in Figure 2, in coalition governments, ministers serve as both agents of the prime minister and of their party, complicating the accountability chain (Andeweg, 2000; Dowding & Dumont, 2008).

The complexity of the accountability chain in coalition governments alters the way a blameworthy policy crisis relates to potential consequences, such as the forced resignation of a minister. In single-party governments, prime ministers have a stronger electoral incentive to sack failing and unpopular ministers (Dewan & Dowding, 2005). For the United Kingdom, Dewan and Dowding (2005) have shown that firing ministers after calls for resignation boosts the popularity of the sitting government. Thus, a resignation has a “corrective effect” on government’s popularity after political scandals. This “corrective effect” of firing ministers, or disposing of them in another way, is stronger in single-party governments. In coalition governments, political parties share policy responsibility, and thus, party leaders have less
electoral incentive to fire their ministers (Dewan & Dowding, 2005, p. 55). At the same time, prime ministers in coalition governments are more constrained to sack or reshuffle ministers after failing performance. After all, such a move might upset the coalition partner and could trigger complex negotiation processes about renewed portfolio allocation in the coalition (Fischer et al., 2012, p. 506; Huber & Martinez-Gallardo, 2008). Several studies confirmed that ministers are generally less likely to be fired, or reshuffled, in coalition governments (Budge, 1985; Dowding & Dumont, 2008; Huber & Martinez-Gallardo, 2008).

Meanwhile, classic studies on majoritarian versus consensual parliamentary democracies (Lijphart, 1999, 2012) report on opposite effects of formal political structures in terms of political elite culture. Because majoritarian two-party systems concentrate executive power in single-party majority cabinets, parliamentarians and opposition parties have less opportunity to politicize policy failures in Parliament, hold the minister to account and force policy change. For coalition governments in a consensual multiparty regime, Andeweg (1992) concluded that more “genuine give-and-take relationships between government and parliament” give parliamentarians a stronger role as accountholders and greater policy influence (Lijphart, 2012, p. 36).

Beyond government composition, other formal rules such as the width of formal ministerial responsibility play a role (De Ruiter, 2019b; cf. Hinterleitner, 2020, on what he calls the restrictive versus extensive conventions of resignation). Certain systems have strict formal provision for ministerial responsibility, thereby limiting parliamentary opponents’ opportunities to claim that officeholders are responsible for administrative failures (Hinterleitner, 2020). In addition, the formal powers of Parliament to call ministers to account matter. The institutional prerogatives of opponents in Parliament, such as the power to question officeholders or to sanction them with motions of no-confidence, affect their opportunities to blame to officeholders. Hinterleitner’s (2020) comparative case-study across three political regimes with different institutional arrangements for ministerial responsibility confirms this effect. However, many studies have found that the link between formal accountability rules, such as ministerial responsibility, and forced resignations is imperfect at best (Berlinski et al., 2012; Fischer, 2012; Thompson & Tillotsen, 1999; Woodhouse, 1994). Fischer (2012, p. 616) goes even further in a later analysis of 133 German resignation issues, concluding that “the stronger the link between a resignation issue and ministerial responsibility, the less likely is a resignation” (original emphasis). Hinterleitner (2020) similarly concludes that despite differences in the extent of ministerial responsibility, political systems are to some degree “conflict stable,” and that incumbents are “not easily thrown off track by the political quarrels they must digest at irregular intervals” (p. 144).

**Institutional Complexity and Policy-Making Involvement: Blame Shifting Opportunities**

Institutional complexity also plays a role in policy crises that involve multiple government levels, which can provide actors with horizontal as well as vertical blame shifting opportunities and lower the likelihood of political sanctions or policy adaptations (Hobolt & Tilley, 2014; Hood, 2011; Rittberger et al., 2017). Since the 1980s, administrative reforms in many countries put various government tasks at arm’s length from their principals, their ministers (Peters & Pierre,
Avoiding Blame in Policy Crises in Different Institutional Settings

While these reforms were also aimed at improved performance and insulation from political interference, blame avoidance was considered an important rationale behind many of the reforms (Flinders, 2008; Hood, 2011). Studies in experimental economics and public administration have shown that principals dodge responsibility for unpopular decisions by delegating those decisions to agents (Bartling & Fischbacher, 2012; Hood, 2011, p. 68; Weaver, 1986, p. 390). At least, “by charging the agency with the implementation . . . legislators avoid or at least disguise their responsibility for the consequences of the decision ultimately made” (Fiorina, 1982, p. 47). For instance, Hinterleitner (2020, p. 139) finds in his comparative study on several blame games in the United Kingdom (compared to Switzerland and Germany), an “administrative bias,” through agencification that keeps controversies away from central government political responsibility and reinforces policy inertia.

Mortensen (2013) found in a study on hospital reform in Norway that central state-level authorities received less blame for healthcare problems after the decentralization reform than before. Also, in countries with more decentralized structures, such as Australia, the United States, or Switzerland, more actors share responsibility, and thus blame can be dispersed when things go wrong (Hinterleitner & Sager, 2017). Multilevel governance structures also increase blame avoidance options across state borders or supranational levels (Curtin, 2007). For example, Heinkelmann-Wild et al. (2020, p. 92) found that Austrian and German governing parties engage in more “frequent blame-shifting” to external EU actors when “policies are implemented by national–level actors and they are consequently exposed to high blame pressure.”

However, not all studies found institutional complexity to play a main role in blame avoidance behavior or in its effectiveness. For example, Mortensen (2013) showed in another study of a Danish healthcare decentralization reform that whether actors were from the same party was more important for blame attribution than institutional setup. In addition, Hobolt and Tilley (2014, p. 141) found that voters are not easily fooled: even in the case of complicated responsibility distribution in EU policies, EU citizens would assign responsibility “correctly.”

Whether an officeholder can disperse responsibility or push blame credibly downwards depends on multiple factors, such as the visibility of the principal, the type of delegation, and the number of responsible actors. First, very visible actors, such as presidents or ministers, cannot easily deflect blame by way of delegation, as they are the ones in the limelight and thus the first to blame if mishaps occur (Bishop, 1990; Horn, 1995, p. 46; Woodhouse, 2004). Ellis (1994) argued that even when cleverly positioned “lightning rod” agents distract the blame, the lightning rod sparks additional dissatisfaction with the principal. Second, it matters whether the decentral agent in case is a privatized actor, an outsourced operation, or a government agency. For example, Piatak and others (2017, p. 987; cf. Hinterleitner, 2020) found that if a service is contracted out instead of left to an agency, the political authority is seen as less in control over the service and therefore receives less blame for service failures. Third, actors have more blame shifting incentives and opportunities when they operate in a field with many other actors and organizations who are all responsible for a small part of the policy implementation (Flinders, 2008; Moynihan, 2012). This is called the problem of the “many hands” (Thompson, 1980).

Hurricane Katrina was a famous case in which diffused responsibility led to an extensive blame game (Maestas et al., 2008; Moynihan, 2012).
Actors’ visibility, delegation types and network responsibility thus play a role in whether the accused will be able to deflect blame, or end up with blame sharing or blame backfiring (Flinders, 2008; Hood, 2002, p. 326; Moynihan, 2012). In addition, these factors might interact. For example, Mortensen (2016) showed that the agencification of the Danish railways was accompanied by top managers blaming the political executives less often but blaming other railway operators more often after negative press coverage. At the same time, opposition MPs continued to blame the minister for railway problems, which supports the view that a highly visible actor, such as a minister, has limited blame shifting opportunities (Mortensen, 2016) and might have to resort to more accommodative blame responses, such as apologies and policy adaptations.

The “structural–instrumental” approach dominates in studies on accountability relations, focusing on formal structures and the operations of certain rules and mechanisms (Bovens, 2010, p. 948; Reichersdorfer et al., 2013). Yet, within the same formalized institutional settings, blame games lead to different results for politicians accused of similar failures. Within one and the same institutional context, political life is characterized by limited control of both agents and principals over events, ambiguity over causal and role responsibility, and uncertainty over the criteria to judge behavior (Olsen, 2017, p. 10).

**Informal Institutional Factors: Authoritative Accountholders and Appropriate Behavior**

Accountability studies have therefore moved beyond studying formal political–institutional mechanisms to include more “cultural–institutional” approaches (Busuioc & Lodge, 2017; Olsen, 2013; Reichersdorfer et al., 2013, p. 288). Scholarly work on public accountability has shed increasing light on the effect of informal institutions on accountability and blame (Boin et al., 2009; Brändström, 2016; Fischer, 2012; Fischer et al., 2006; Hood et al., 2009). March and Olsen have long argued that political institutions constitute more than formal–legal structures, they include informal rules and standard operating procedures, “shared meanings and practices that come to be taken as given over a long period of time” (March & Olsen, 1996, p. 249). Institutions therefore include both formal “rules–in–form” and informal “rules–in–use” (Lowndes et al., 2006; Ostrom, 2011, p. 21).

Olsen (2015, p. 459) refers to these informal “rules–in–use” as “repertoires of socially constructed and validated accounts and responses to accounts exist, influenced by what is intelligible, expected and anticipated, appropriate and legitimate in specific political–cultural contexts” (cf. March & Olsen, 1998). A cultural–institutional approach draws attention to the interrelatedness of multiple accountholders, and the role of norms and values in accountability processes (Busuioc & Lodge, 2017; Dubnick, 2014; Olsen, 2013, 2017; Reichersdorfer et al., 2013; Schillemans, 2016). Institutional settings can thus differ with regard to (a) “which authoritative informal accountholders constrain officeholders” blame avoidance options, and (b) how accountholders and account givers interact and which blame avoidance behavior is considered more appropriate than others.
Informal Institutional Actors: Authoritative Actors and the Role of Media

Authoritative opponents for officeholders in blame games can be multiple actors, including those in the political, administrative, legal, and professional spheres, due to their formal as well as informal accountability roles in the event (Romzek & Dubnick, 1987). Australian and Scandinavian studies have shown that high-level civil servants and political staff are increasingly involved in how their ministers account for their behavior in politically sensitive issues (Reichersdorfer et al., 2013; Salomonsen et al., 2016; Tiernan, 2007). While officeholders are caught in a myriad of accountability relations, not all of these relations have equal informal clout in generating blame for officeholders in question (Busuioc & Lodge, 2017).

Officeholders are increasingly held to account by actors who solely have an informal role in blame games, such as the media and interest groups (Kuipers & Brändström, 2020). According to Djerf-Pierre and others (2014, p. 325), “the watchdog function of the media is fundamental in a democracy,” while Bovens concluded that the media are fast gaining power as informal accountholders (2007, p. 455). Single-party governments, such as the United Kingdom, show indeed that calls for resignations of officeholders in the media more than double the risk that these officeholders are forced to resign (Berlinski et al., 2010, 2012).

Journalists are more than neutral evaluators or mere mouthpieces for communication by political actors in opposition. Reporters and media watchdogs have their own ideas about how to hold ministers to account and what needs to be done to address the harm (Anderson et al., 2018; Strömbäck, 2008). In their explanations of why the crisis happened, and in their scrutiny of the actions of officeholders, journalists can be prone to sensationalism and compartmentalization. Anderson and others (2018, p. 928) concluded in their analysis of media coverage on the Australian bush fires in 2009, in which 173 people died, that the media’s focus on the hunt for culprits, “near-silenced meaningful discussion of the complexity of fire science, impacts of climate change on weather conditions, and calls for adaptation.”

The level of mediatization of the political context is indicative also of the role and influence of media in blame games (Djerf-Pierre et al., 2014; Mazzoleni, 2008; Strömbäck & Esser, 2014). Mediatization describes the process of institutionalization of media in society and the political sphere (Strömbäck & Esser, 2014). In a strongly mediatized political sphere, “political and other social actors not only adapt to the media logic and the predominant news values, but also adopt these and, more or less consciously, allow the media logic and the standards of newsworthiness to become a built-in part of the governing processes” (Strömbäck, 2008, p. 239).

In addition, increased mediatization gives a more prominent role to groups which do not necessarily have an institutionalized role in blame games. Since 2010, media scholars have concluded that “hyper-accelerated news cycles” accord a prominent role to citizens, action groups, and other active social media users in framing and fueling political scandals (Ceron, 2015; Chadwick, 2011, 2017; Vaccari et al., 2015). While traditional journalists can to a certain extent be regarded as “insiders” who are familiar and socialized with the informal norms of the political culture, these groups are not. While there is limited research on the role of these citizen activists and the interaction between traditional and new media forms in blame games, the role of social media is likely to increase further (Chadwick, 2017; Nielsen & Schrøder, 2014). Stern (2017, p. 6)
concluded that with the rise of social media, “the media, public sector accountability fora, and other actors in public discourse are provided with real time information, competing accounts regarding policy crises, and feedback (though not necessarily sound, systematic, or reliable) regarding citizen reactions and satisfaction with services provided by crisis actors.”

**Rules-in-Use: Norms of Appropriate Behavior**

Informal factors influence how actors behave in blame games and what is considered “appropriate” or “unacceptable” blame avoidance behavior. Bovens (2010, p. 962) already argued that accountholders “implicitly or explicitly formulate notions of accountability as a virtue when they judge the performance of actors.” In a similar vein, Reichersdorfer and others (2013, p. 287) concluded that:

> Once a crisis has broken out . . . , the ensuing processes of information, debate and decisions on consequences are greatly infused by conflicts over norms and values, . . . resulting decisions on consequences serve to establish (temporary) norms for appropriate and inappropriate behavior.

Across political systems, calls for the scalps of officeholders have increased (Bovens et al., 2015; De Ruiter, 2019b). However, norms for political sanctions are not similar across institutional settings and “what gets you off the hook of blame from one cultural starting-point may only dig you into a deeper accountability hole in another setting” (Hood, 2014, p. 614). Scholars have long pointed at strong differences in political elite cultures (Lijphart, 1975). In majoritarian political cultures, a winner–take–all form of politics prevails (Lijphart, 1999). In consensual political cultures, political elites “consider consultation more appropriate than antagonistic behavior” (Beyers et al., 2014, p. 10; Lijphart, 2012, pp. 274–275). Actors in political consensus cultures could thus have different ideas of appropriate ways of interacting during accountability episodes than actors in adversarial cultures. Comparative research on differences in accountability cultures in Westminster and consociational systems (the Netherlands and New South Wales in Australia) shows that officeholders in political consensus cultures focused on accommodating to opposition parties, such as mixing justifications for the situation with reparative policy initiatives aimed at “fixing the problem.” Meanwhile, in majoritarian systems, officeholders take a more adversarial approach to accountability after policy failures, such as attacking and discrediting opposition concerns (De Ruiter, 2019a, 2019b).

Differences in political elite cultures have become even more pronounced with the advent of elite polarization in Western democracies, especially in U.S. politics (Druckman et al., 2013). Elite polarization occurs when political opponents take up increasingly extreme ideological positions, showing less willingness to compromise on policy and engaging in generating blame and scandalizing opponents (Layman et al., 2006; Weaver, 2018). Weaver (2018) proposed that blame generating behavior is “rampant” and “ubiquitous” in American politics. In such polarized circumstances, it is unlikely that rational officeholders will admit responsibility for an event, let
alone try to accommodate opponents with policy reparations for alleged failures. Levels of elite polarization and wider political elite culture therefore affect the leeway that officeholders have in either denying or admitting blame.

**Not Everything Is Institutionalized: The Role of Noninstitutional Factors**

The risk that “when all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail” certainly applies to research too. Rather than seeing institutional factors as deterministic, they serve as the “rules of the game” for both officeholders and their opponents, making certain blame accusations more attainable than others, while at the same time incentivizing officeholders to adopt certain blame avoidance tactics over others (Weaver & Rockman, 1993). These norms and rules can provide contradicting and overlapping institutional opportunities to opponents “for using accountability demands and responses as a rhetorical device in partisan battles” (Olsen, 2017, p. 15; cf. Connaughton, 2006). Furthermore, a myriad of noninstitutional factors shape blame games and blame avoidance behavior, ranging from the saliency of the event, to the individual popularity of the officeholder and the coincidental timing in the electoral cycle.

**Characteristics of the Event or Issue**

“A policy failure, like all news developments, is a creation of the language used to depict it; its identification is a political act, not a recognition of a fact” (Edelman, 1988, p. 31). No policy execution is without its performance deficits. There is always a gap between the expectations and demands placed on public officeholders and the goals policy implementation. By and large, the public does not expect social welfare workers to alleviate all poverty, the police to catch all criminals, or doctors to heal all patients. Sometimes, a crisis becomes a focusing event that elevates failures to a major political concern, implicating political performance at the highest level or an entire policy sector (Ansell et al., 2016, pp. 419–420). Pollitt (2006, p. 39) argued that “when embarrassments, scandals, or disasters occur, politicians and the media suddenly take an enormously detailed interest in organizational activities they have never asked about before.” Many policy and administrative incidents within an officeholder’s portfolio can be considered potentially blameworthy, but some events are more likely to instigate blame games than others.

Incidents that can be linked to critical values, such as national security, that have been violated or threatened often have a higher saliency than those that cannot (Brändström & Kuipers, 2003). In addition, policy crises where the consequences have been felt by average citizens, in terms of material costs, are more likely to attract public interest (Hinterleitner, 2020). Hinterleitner studied the characteristics of issues in his comparative case study along two dimensions: the salience dimension (how value-loaded and severe the issue is in the eyes of the public and media) and the proximity–distance dimension (how much the issue affects citizens personally). He found that distant–salient issues tend to generalize severe blame games that appeal to stakeholders’ emotions and moral responsibilities. Incumbent political executives are likely to engage in blame deflection rather than in reframing the issue because they wish to match their attitude to the dominant feelings aroused in society and cannot risk “to stand on the wrong side of the issue” (Hinterleitner, 2020, p. 148). With regards to issue proximity, he concludes that in those
cases, incumbents are much more likely to attempt at reframing, while opponents put a serious
effort in framing the issue as a scandal in the first place, in leveraging the public’s engagement
with the issue and drawing incumbents into the blame game (Hinterleitner, 2020, p. 153).

Officeholder’s Reputation and Leadership Style

Leaders with a “good stock of pre-crisis political capital” are more likely to survive blame games
politically, while those who “have recently been getting a good deal of ‘bad press’” are more
likely to have to pander to oppositional forces (Boin et al., 2009, p. 100; cf. Bennister et al., 2017).
Likewise, ministers with a “scorecard” — i.e., those that have been previously involved in blame
games — are scrutinized more intensively by opponents, have decreasing agency to avoid blame,
and less credibility with which to offer policy change and secure their survival (De Ruiter, 2019b).
In a sense, officeholders can be slowly “backed into a corner” as their political capital begins to
wane (Hood et al., 2016).

In addition, Boin and others (2010) found that officeholders’ personal leadership style, such as
their need for control and sensitivity to context, can influence the way they manage post-crisis
scrutiny and their vulnerability for blame attribution. They found that in the political response to
Hurricane Katrina, George W. Bush’s leadership style, including his propensity for a hands-off
 crisis approach and his inclination to “stay the course,” made him and his administration
vulnerable to charges of negligence and mismanagement (Boin et al., 2010, p. 720).

Timing of Policy Crisis Allegations

The risk of blame further increases if officeholders are caught up in a crisis that can be seen as
part of a series, or an indication of policy implementation on which their predecessors were
already performing badly, as ministers often “must bear some of the brunt of their colleagues’
failures” (Berlinski et al., 2010, p. 568). It matters which other blameworthy events have been
weathered by current incumbents and whether colleagues have been politically “wounded” by
successful blame attribution. Furthermore, situational factors such as upcoming elections can act
as a “fuse” in blame games and trigger sanctioning by the ministers’ political leaders (De Ruiter,

The aforementioned three types of noninstitutional factors (event characteristics, reputation,
and timing) underline the importance of avoiding an overtly deterministic approach to
institutional mechanisms in blame games.

How to Fit It All Together? An Institutional Framework for Blame Games

To recap, blame games can take place after alleged policy crises, as part of an accountability
process in which officeholders and their opponents contest the harm caused by an event, the
perceived responsibility of the officeholder for that harm, and the way to address that harm at
given any point in time. The politics of accountability are pervasive, as officeholders must
convince formal and informal account-holding actors — media, Parliament, and prime ministers
— that they should not “carry the can” for the controversial events in question or that they can repair policy failures that led to the crisis (Boin et al., 2009; Brändström & Kuipers, 2003). Though often neglected in blame avoidance studies, formal and informal institutional factors influence the leeway for officeholders and their opponents to dodge or attribute blame or successfully reallocate blame to others.

First of all, the formal accountability regime constrains officeholders’ opportunity for blame avoidance and political survival. Officeholders in single-party governments are much more vulnerable if they become unpopular among the public, as the “corrective effect” of their sacking is more rewarding to their political party and their prime minister than in coalition governments. Multiparty government coalitions complicate the chain of delegation in terms of accountability and make blame attribution more difficult. Formal institutional complexity and limited policy involvement by officeholders further bolster their blame avoidance options, such as when the involvement of many decentralized government actors or contractors provides officeholders with horizontal or vertical blame shifting opportunities. For example, Hinterleitner (2020, p. 163), in his analysis of institutional factors in policy controversies, found that in the United Kingdom, “the ‘administration bias’, injected by forms of agencification and reinforced by the work of parliamentary committees, ensures that the ministerial blame shield is often not even checked for its resilience during a blame game because media attention and opponent attacks overwhelmingly focus on administrative actors and entities.” As a result, formal institutional factors both shielded ministers from political sanctions and increased the likelihood of policy inertia.

Next, informal rules explain how media influence and polarization processes and other elements of political elite cultures have made certain opponents more powerful than others in getting political “scalps” and bringing about policy change. Also, accommodative blame management tactics by officeholders, such as admitting responsibility and taking action to repair policies, are more likely in some settings than in others. For example, in highly mediatized and adversarial cultures like the Australian state of New South Wales, incumbent political executives are more likely to employ defensive tactics over accommodative ones, meaning that they are more likely to deny failures than to offer policy reparations (De Ruiter, 2019b, p. 274).

Formal and informal institutional factors can reinforce each other. For example, ministers who are bound by stronger formal parliamentary accountability combined with informal norms regarding appropriate account giving are more likely to take responsibility for failures down the hierarchy in their administration, or to take the political fall over policy failures in which they were only partially involved (De Ruiter, 2019b). In all cases, these formal and informal institutionalized factors coincide with noninstitutional factors such as the popularity of the officeholder or the saliency of the failure. The framework in Figure 3 captures the role of formal and informal institutions in political blame games.
Avoiding Blame in Policy Crises in Different Institutional Settings

Figure 3. Analytical framework of institutional factors in blame games.

Source: Adapted from Hinterleitner (2020, p. 7).

This analytical framework can be used in future comparative case studies across different jurisdictions, which will enable us to further entangle the role of institutional factors in blame games. As Hinterleitner (2017, 2020) pointed out multiple times, cross-institutional and cross-cultural empirical research on blame avoidance is remarkably sparse. Blame avoidance literature is dominated by increasingly sophisticated quantitative methods (Hood et al., 2016; Resodihardjo et al., 2016). While these methods are certainly valuable, blame games entail more than a series of ad-hoc, attack-reaction verbal exchanges; they are expressions of subtle institutional arrangements and cultural norms of what are legitimate public actions (Leong & Howlett, 2017). Such elements of blame games are difficult to capture in statistical studies (cf. Resodihardjo et al., 2016).

Future Crisis and Blame Avoidance Research Avenues

To conclude, perceived policy crises are often accompanied by “blame games” (Boin et al., 2009; Hood, 2011). The way these crisis-induced blame games play out is affected by the institutional settings in which they play out. Formal and informal institutions shape the role, the power, and the opportunities of both incumbent politicians and their opponents in avoiding and attributing blame in policy crises. Most importantly, informal accountability actors, fora, and norms about appropriate behavior shape blame processes and policy outcomes. When executives take the stand to account for personal or policy performance failures, norms on political accountability are sharpened and (re-)confirmed. According to Busuioc and Lodge (2016, 2017), “the repeated but usually limited moments of account holding and giving are, for both parties, about signalling one’s status and appearing reputable” (2016, pp. 251–252).
Important avenues for future research can be found in blame games after crises where institutions themselves are questioned, contested, or in flux. Olsen (2017) argued that those moments of turbulence can expose and challenge the formal and informal rules that would ordinarily affect blame games. First, future research should therefore concentrate on the role of institutional factors in blame games wherein voices from outside play a prominent role. If indeed news cycles and the rise of social media provide a more prominent role to institutional “outsiders,” the question arises to what extent this will impact the influence of institutional settings in shaping blame games. This also aligns with Leong and Howlett’s call that blame games should be “analysed as part of the larger issue of the legitimation of public actions, rather than, as is often the case, solely as an aspect of the utilitarian calculations and risk management activities of politicians and officials” (Leong & Howlett, 2017, p. 599).

Second, the structuring role of political institutions is more ambiguous in multilevel blame games, which span over several accountability regimes and where certain accountability norms and practices can both overlap and conflict. In multilevel blame games it is often unclear “who can legitimately call whom to account for what, who controls relevant incentives and information, and what normative criteria shall have priority” (Olsen, 2015, p. 462). Therefore, multilevel blame games form a unique opportunity to study which institutional factors prevail in high-stakes blame games. Examples could be blame games that bridge national and European levels, such as the discussion over the uptake of asylum seekers who arrive in the Southern European countries. Which rules-in-use exist at the EU level and the national levels? Which prevail during these high-stakes clashes, especially when officeholders have to explain policy outcomes agreed to at the EU level towards their parliaments and electorates back home? How do political actors in multilevel blame games manage and satisfy accountability demands from different accountability regimes?

Last, parliamentary regimes such as Poland and Hungary would be interesting cases for further study. These systems experience “democratic backsliding,” such as the emergence of more authoritarian leadership and less adherence to the rule of law (Dawson & Hanley, 2016; Foa & Mounk, 2017). What if certain governments and officeholders suddenly start to reject ingrained formal rules and informal rules-in-use in their engagement with accountability forums such as parliaments? Will these norms hold or erode? Future research should focus on how political actors reject, ignore, or try to change formal rules and rules-in-use regarding ministerial accountability, and what if any effects this has on the democratic values of responsible government and democratic accountability.

References


Avoiding Blame in Policy Crises in Different Institutional Settings


Avoiding Blame in Policy Crises in Different Institutional Settings


Ellis, R. (1994). *Presidential lightning rods the politics of blame avoidance*. University Press Of Kansas


Avoiding Blame in Policy Crises in Different Institutional Settings


Avoiding Blame in Policy Crises in Different Institutional Settings


**Related Articles**

Accountability and Blame Avoidance After Crises

Blame Avoidance and Crisis Inquiries

Foundations of Responsive Crisis Management: Institutional Design and Information

Organizational and Institutional Crisis Management