

## *Central Themes and questions*

Improve your understanding of the causes and effects of:

- [Agency strategies](#)
- [Presentational strategies](#)
- [Policy strategies](#)

... in a world characterized by [negativity bias](#) and increased [mediatization](#) of politics

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Central to politics is the question of who should be blamed for problems and neglect in the public sector and who should be deemed responsible for solving the problems. For instance, is depreciation of the local government's elder care the local government's responsibility or is it a consequence of the central government's strict economic policies? And when the media focus intensively on problems within the sphere of a given central agency, is it then the minister who is blamed or is he/she able to distance him/herself from the problems?

In this seminar, we focus on the question whether the media, and ultimately the voters, always place responsibility for failures and unpopular policy outcomes with the central state government or whether the central state government/ministers are able to avoid public blame through skillful institutional design, strategic communication, or policy design. To answer this question, we will consult the blame avoidance literature that has developed in political science over the last decades.

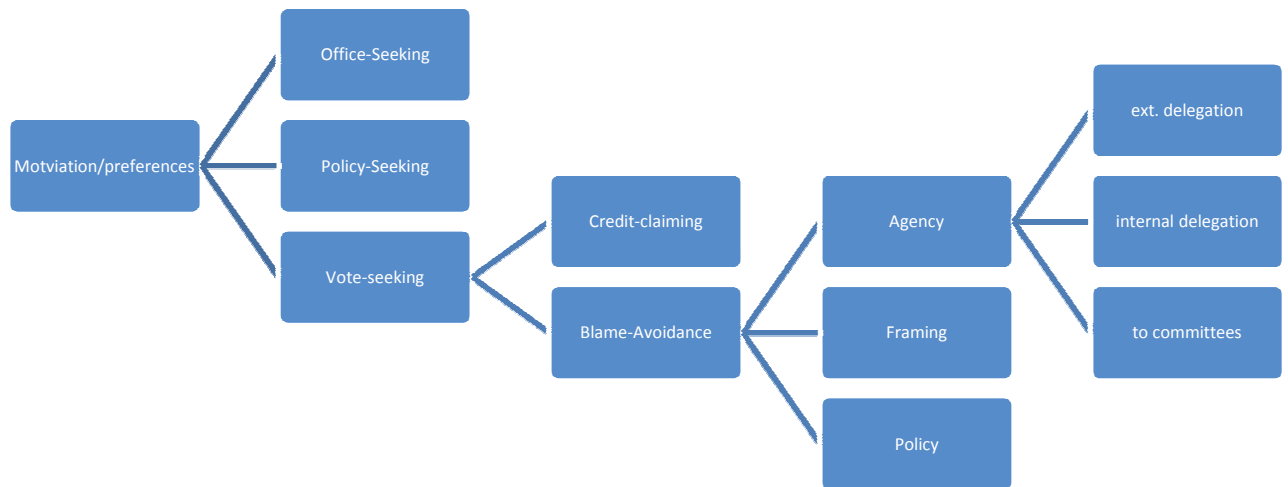
According to the blame avoidance literature, politicians and bureaucrats apply various blame avoidance strategies when faced with public criticism. These include so-called presentation strategies, which are attempts to avoid or limit blame by spin, excuses, timing, justifications, and framing. In discussing these strategies, we will also address causes and consequences of the (increasing) use of 'spin doctors' in current politics.

Another type of blame avoidance strategy is the agency strategy, which is aimed at placing others in the front line of blame when things go wrong. In discussing this strategy, we will focus on how the overlapping responsibilities between the central state, the regional, and the local level of governance in Denmark can be used by political actors to strategically transfer blame from one level of decision-making to another.

Finally, blame avoidance policy strategies are attempts to diffuse blame by the substance or content of the policy rather than by how its presentation is handled or who is placed in the front line of responsibility. According to many classic policy perspectives, for instance, it is a puzzle why politicians decide to give up discretionary influence on a range of important policies such as cash benefits and pensions. However, from a blame avoidance perspective such automatization – and hence depoliticization – of transfer benefits is perfectly understandable as a policy blame avoidance strategy.

The use and consequences of these blame avoidance strategies link to a set of central questions about influence and responsibility in the public sector, about the relationship between the institutional setup and the political agenda, and, more broadly, about the relationship between the media, voters, politics, and administration.

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Why increasing importance over time?

- increased regulation of society
- decline of parties
- changing political campaigns
- new media
- recession/fiscal stress
- welfare retrenchment
- loss of acknowledgement within
- internalized blame games
- EU / Globalization
- Voters are less loyal

### Two preconditions when applying the blame avoidance perspective:

- The government/politicians are involved in activities/decisions that (potentially) impose losses and costs to part of the electorate
- Voters have the opportunity to punish or reward the government at general elections – and they use this opportunity!

### Strengths of the blame avoidance perspective

- Specifies the expected behavior of rational re-elected motivated politicians (and career oriented bureaucrats)
- Relies on a realistic model of the citizens' voting behavior (discuss this much more next Friday)
- Many observable implications can be derived from this theoretical perspective
- The theory has become more relevant over time because of some broader developments in society

### Weaknesses/undecided questions

- How valid are the assumptions underlying the theory?
- How strong is for instance the so called negativity bias?
- Does formal delegation of authority work as expected?

- Does the presentational strategies function as hypothesized
- Does the policy strategies work as expected?

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## *Summing up – Microfoundations*

### **Important concepts:**

- Domains of gains versus domains of losses
- Status-quo bias
- Costs are more important than gains
  - Negativity bias (but as a consequence of positivity bias!)

### **Evidence that negativity bias is a universal phenomenon:**

- Can be observed both among animals and humans!
- Animals learn better from negative experience than from positive experience
- Pain versus no pain...
- You react much quicker to angry than to happy faces

### **More general explanations of negativity bias:**

- Adaptive/evolutionary explanation (avoid death is better than improving life conditions)
  - Development theory (we are predisposed for a negativity bias, but it can also be further developed after we are born)
  - Mechanical theory (rather similar to Lau's "Figure ground" hypothesis)
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## *Negativity bias & Mediatization – Overview*

Negativity bias (voters and media)

### Quattrone & Tversky (1988)

Rational Theory → Prospect Theory

- The reference point is important
- Loss domain: more willing to risk
- Gain domain: more risk averse
- Status quo has a special value
- Losses weight more than gains

### Lau (1985)

- 1.) Figure-Ground hypothesis
  - a. Negative information is more salient because of a generally positive background
- 2.) Cost-orientation hypothesis
  - a. Losses are more important than gains (adaptive, evolutionary)

Research design – survey analysis

- 1.) Context-variable: Trust
- 2.) Information – Positive (0-5 arguments for); negative (0-5 arguments against)

- 3.) Costs (“How much do you care”)
- 4.) Party 3D
- 5.) Dependent variable: 100-points feeling grade

Soroka (2006)

“Mediatization” of politics:

- Wien & Elmelund-Praestekaer (2009)
- Vasterman (2005)
- Walgrave & van Aelst (2006)
- Sotirovic (2003)
- Newton (2006)
- Soroka (2006)

### ***Texts that transcend the structure of the seminar***

*Why is Blame Avoidance often more important to policy makers than the “good policy” or “credit claiming” motive?*

Voters are more sensitive to what has done to them than to what has been done for them.

*Should we expect a similar development in a parliamentary system like the Danish one?*

Smaller parties maybe better off by taking pointed controversial positions in order to build a distinctive political base and avoid becoming lost in a crowded field

8 different blame avoidance strategies

1. Agenda limitation (social democrats in Denmark → migration, integration)
2. Redefine the issue (integration not a burden, instead it is good for our future)
3. Throw good money after bad (war in Iraq)
4. Pass the buck (s.o. else is taking the blame, tarifautonomie)
5. Find a scapegoat (bp oil spill)
6. Jump on the bandwagon (merkel → Irakstrategie)
7. Circle the wagons (diffuse decisions; oversize agreements)
8. Stop me before I kill again (I don't want to be involved in it)

**Weaver (1986)**

Negativity bias: voters tendency to be more sensitive to real or potential losses than they are to gains.

Hood (2002)

Hood (2007)

*Hypotheses 1:* Politicians (principals) delegate to avoid blame for unpopular decisions (outcome).

*Hypothesis 2:* By delegating decision-making authority the principal avoids/reduces the risk of blame when things go wrong.

#### **Empirical findings**

- Finally, remember that there may be many other explanations of why politicians choose to delegate decision-making authority than a

blame avoidance motive. For instance, they may seek to “promote the best policy” or to maximize “income/leisure” (cf. Voigt and Salzberger 2002).

### *Mini-cases discussed during the seminar*

- Amanda (the IT-scandal)
- The Danish Prime minister’s lightning rods opportunities
- The Danish foreign minister’s “holiday gate”
- The “mail-gate” (overpayment of Danish private hospitals)
- The Law of a Transfer regulation percentage

#### The early retirement reforms of 1998 and 2006

1998 → Social Democrats / Liberals		2006 → Conservatives / Lib. /DPP	
Domains	Strategies	Domains	Strategies
Government: → Domain of Losses  Voters: → Domain of gains (ref. point status quo)	→ Circle the wagons (broad agreement) → Limit the agenda (secret negotiations between Gov. + Opp.) → Find a scapegoat (th EU) → Presentational Strategies → TIMING	Government: → Domain of Losses  Voters: → Domain of gains/losses ??	2003 → welfare commission → reform is necessary! → Damn lies and statistics → Limit the agenda (election in 2005, final report 2006, no discussion during election) → It could be worse! → Stop me before I kill again (automatic government) → Justification → Circle the wagons → Future costs
50% of lost voters for SD		Government still in charge	

### *Agency Strategies I – Overview*

Blame Avoidance as a cause of delegation

#### Bartling & Fischbacher (2008):

1. Why delegate? (Cause)
2. The effect of delegation? (Effect)

- Limitations: in real world – who is responsible is the question? Overlapping responsibilities → low external validity; assumes that people are rational, one-shot-game
- Strength: high internal validity
- If the formal lines of authority are well-known by the voters the two hypotheses get empirical support (Bartling and Fischbacher 2008).

#### Blame Avoidance effects of delegation

##### Maestas et al. (2008)

- Hypothesis:
  - Ideology: Conservatives tend to blame decentralized actors/levels.
  - Partisan: Ingroup/Outgroup logic Blame politicians from the other party
  - Media attention: More attention → more blame to state level
  - Political knowledge: more knowledge → more diffused blame attribution
- Often, however, real world political discussions concern who is formally responsible and who made what decisions? In those cases the voters' political ideology, partisanship, attention to media coverage (and political knowledge) may influence voters' blame attribution (Maestas et al. 2008).

##### Mortensen (2010)

#### Arguments against simple effects

1. Path-Dependence
  2. Delegates resist to take the role as scapegoats
  3. Uncertainty about formal responsibility
  4. Public visibility of the delegator
  5. Depends on the media outlet
- Furthermore, there is no close relationship between (changes) in formal decision-making authority and media's attribution of blame or credit and hence no strong trade-off between directional power and blame avoidance (Mortensen 2010).

## *Agency Strategies II – Overview*

#### **A few take-away points:**

- Learned a new perspective on principal-agent relations. It is not only about whether the agent is loyal to the principal's policy preferences:
  - "Do as we tell you – but if things go wrong you get the trouble!"
- Different types of agency strategies:
  - Delegation of responsibility to ministers, advisers, top-bureaucrats, etc. (Chinese boxes of principal-agent relations)

- Delegation of responsibility to other authorities (ex. Counties, municipalities, agencies, etc.)
- The principal's dilemma
  - A credible lightning rod is created in good times (by giving him/her credit for popular outcomes and policies)
  - A credible lightning rod has to be visible, but at the same time distanced from the principal
- Agency-strategies might have become more important over time
  - More intensive competition about voters, more demanding (and perhaps more negative) voters, more issues can potentially become scandals, a more critical press, etc.

Blame Avoidance as a cause of internal delegation

[Ellis \(1994\)](#)

Blame Avoidance effects of internal delegation

[Ellis \(1994\)](#)

[Christensen \(2006\) – indirectly](#)

## *Agency Strategies III – Overview*

### **Summing Up:**

1. The public blame avoidance effect of appointing commissions of inquiry are apparently very limited
2. A major problem for the minister/government is that the credibility of the commission is a function of how critical the report is towards the minister/government!
3. On the other hand, the blame avoidance motive seems to be important to the decision to appoint a commission!
  - Is this because the minister mistakenly believes that the appointment of the commission has a blame avoidance effect?
  - But if he/she believes it has a blame avoidance effect then why is it always the opposition that demands an independent inquiry?
  - Are commissions of inquiry primarily the opposition's tools or the government's tools?
4. Many blame avoidance effects have not been investigated
  - Does a commission affect the content of the media agenda?
  - Does a commission affect the political agenda?
  - Does a commission buy the minister time? (for instance with respect to elections)
  - How are commissions used strategically in political communication? (probably require some case studies)

[Hood's \(2007, p. 199\) definition:](#)

“Agency strategies can be defined as attempts by officeholders or institutions to avoid or limit blame by the way that formal responsibility, competency or jurisdiction is allocated among institutions and officeholders”.

Within this broad definition we have looked at different types of agency strategies:

<b>Time dimension</b>			
		Ex ante	Ex post
<b>Ministerial jurisdiction</b>	Within	Delegation to advisers, department heads, agency heads (Ellis, Grønnegaard)	
	Outside	Federalism, delegation to municipalities (Maestas et al., Mortensen, Blom-Hansen & Pallesen)	Independent public inquiries (Sulitzenau-Keenan)

Another possible categorization:

<b>Time dimension</b>			
		Ex ante	Ex post
<b>Delegate's role and responsibility</b>	Decision-making power	Municipalities, regions, independent agencies, etc.	
	Advisory functions	Ad hoc advisory commissions (for instance Welfare commission, Labour commission, Tax commission, etc.)	Independent public inquiries

Blame Avoidance as a cause of appointing independent commissions  
[Sulitzenau-Kenan \(2010\)](#)

Blame Avoidance effects of appointing independent commissions  
[Sulitzenau-Kenan \(2006\)](#)

[Sulitzenau-Kenan \(2007\)](#)

## *Presentational Strategies I – Overview*

### Summing up

1. The *use* of presentational blame avoidance strategies:
    - Politicians are not passive bystanders in the political process
    - Political excuses are generally used more than justifications
    - The relative use of political accounts matches a model of blame avoidance
  2. The *effect* of presentational blame avoidance strategies:
    - Overall, political accounts are judged more or less unsatisfactory
    - Justifications work a little better than excuses
  3. Thus, do we reach the similar conclusion as with Sulitzenau-Keenan?
    - Politicians believe that blame avoidance strategies work and hence they use them – blame avoidance theory is good at explaining political behavior
    - BUT – blame avoidance theory is not good at explaining effects
- Politicians (political elites) suffer from an illusion...
- (AND/) OR something wrong with the effect studies...

Blame Avoidance as an explanation of why, when and how to use presentational strategies

Hood et al (2009)  
 Schütz (1993)  
 Schütz (1995)  
 Mortensen (2010)

Blame Avoidance effects of using presentational strategies

[McGraw \(1990\)](#)  
[McGraw \(1991\)](#)

Overview of McGraw's research design:

1990, British Journal of Political Science	1991, American Political Science Review
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 98 undergraduate students</li> <li>• Average age: 23 years</li> <li>• 54 % female, 85 % whites</li> <li>• Evenly split in terms of partisanship</li> <li>○ The study consists of three parts:</li> <li>○ All subjects read about a controversial budget bill amendment that state assembly man Ryan had voted for</li> <li>○ After reading this the subjects were asked to provide their feelings for both the amendment and the assembly man</li> <li>○ The subjects were then given a subset of the different accounts the assembly could provide to his constituency to explain why he voted for the bill</li> <li>○ The subjects were then asked about</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 475 undergraduate students</li> <li>• Average age: 21.5 years</li> <li>• 54% female</li> <li>• Evenly split in terms of partisanship</li> <li>• Similar to the 1990-design, but in addition:</li> <li>○ It also includes the effect of a policy that involved an increase in property taxes in order to fund social welfare programs.</li> <li>○ Includes 5 dependent variables:                             <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Feelings thermometer ratings of the policy (Y1)</li> <li>2. Feelings thermometer ratings of the representative (Y2)</li> <li>3. To what extent is Ryan deserving of blame for his budget amendment vote? (Y3)</li> </ol> </li> </ul>

<p>their feelings toward the assembly man (Y1)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Subjects were then provided with a list of all 12 accounts and asked to rate each in terms of how satisfying they think the account is (Y2)</li> </ul>	<p>4. To what extent is Ryan deserving of credit for his budget amendment vote? (Y4)</p> <p>5. How satisfied are you with Ryan's account at the community meeting? (Y5)</p>
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Hood et al. (2009)

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## ***Presentational Strategies II – Overview***

Presentational strategies as both blaming and blame avoidance tool

Bovens et al. (1999)

Brändström and Kuipers (2003)

Brändström, Kuipers & Daléus (2008)

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## ***Policy Strategies I – Overview***

A few points to remember

- Weaver does not claim that blame avoidance is the only objective of policy makers. *Good policy* and *credit claiming* are also important.
- The blame avoidance objective alone can hardly explain why politicians implement unpopular cutbacks at all
  - But the blame avoidance objective helps understand how they do it
- Weaver is still highly relevant: Today the scope of indexing policies is huge
- There is no simple explanation of the use of indexing and the mechanisms behind vary across programs and policy areas
  - However, as a general observation:
    - Indexing represents a challenge to a good policy perspective and a challenge to a credit claiming perspective.
    - Several blame avoidance strategies may be relevant to understand indexing (“limit the agenda”, “Pass the buck”, “Find a scapegoat”, “Stop me before I kill again”, “Circle the wagons”, and “throw good money after bad”).
- Consequences of Indexation:
  - Consequences for the Policy Process
  - Consequences for Democratic Accountability
  - Consequences for Program Clientele
  - Consequences for the Budget
  - Consequences for the Economy

Blame Avoidance as an explanation of why, when and how to automatize government politics

Weaver (1988)

Weaver (1989)

Weaver & Brooks (2005)

Blame Avoidance effects of using automatic policies

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## *Policy Strategies II – Overview*

Blame Avoidance as an explanation of why, when and how to implement unpopular welfare reforms

Vis & Kersbergen (2007)

### Pierson (1994)

- Starting assumption: Government leaders want to advance their policy agendas and they want to be reelected
- Retrenchment is an exercise in blame avoidance because:
  - Costs of retrenchment are concentrated, benefits are not
  - Voters exhibit a ‘negativity bias’
    - Governments favoring retrenchment face a dilemma!
- Strategies for minimizing costs
  - Obfuscation strategies (decrementalism, indirect incidence, burden shifting)
  - Strategies of division (“divide and conquer”)
  - Strategies of compensation
- Limitations of retrenchment strategies
  - No guarantee of success
  - The applicability of the strategies depend on program characteristics
  - Limit of public blame may be followed by a weakened control over policy (obfuscation strategies)
- Welfare state retrenchment is difficult and risky (but not impossible)!

### Bonoli (2001)

- The basic argument (p.239):
  - “...institutions which concentrate power, by the same token, tend to concentrate accountability. While power concentration enhances the capacity of governments to achieve their policy objectives, it also increases the risk of being held accountable by the general public for possibly unpopular decisions and of being electorally punished as a result”.
  - “In sum, the question of what kind of political institutions are more conducive to welfare restructuring, seems to be largely undetermined on the theoretical level” (p.239).
- Political institutions and power concentration
  1. Parliamentary vs. Separation of Power Systems
  2. Structure of Parliament

3. Electoral System
  4. Referendums
  5. Balanced dual executive
  6. Power concentration and Accountability
    - a. Accountability effect is stronger in highly competitive systems
    - b. Accountability effect is less important in PR systems
    - c. Accountability effect is more important in the run up to an election
- Categorization of political systems with different institutionally-based power concentration (see also Table 8.1., p.248):
    1. UK = High power concentrations
    2. France = Intermediate power concentration
    3. Switzerland = Low power concentration

### Zohlhöfer (2007)

- Theoretical claims:
  - The institutional cooperation strategy (p. 1121):
    - "... governments in single-actor constellations will need to resort to a large number of blame avoidance strategies while governments in multi-actor systems can rely on an 'Institutional Cooperation Strategy' that will help to disperse responsibility and blame"
  - The effect of which party is in government (p. 1122):
    - "... left-wing parties are seen as least inclined to pursue welfare cuts and thus can hope to be believed that there is no alternative to the cuts they propose. [...] The same might be true for bourgeois parties regarding tax increases".
- Look at blame-avoidance strategies in different stages:
  1. Policy design
  2. Collusion with the opposition when policy is being adopted
  3. Presentational strategies
  4. Timing (business cycle)
- Testable Expectations:
  - When 2. is possible (as in Germany) the other three strategies are used less intensively. When 2. is not possible (UK) governments should resort to the other three strategies more often.
- Conclusion:
- The evidence from Germany does not support the expectation that the strategy of institutional cooperation dominates in such a system
- Party competition is of prime importance for the way different strategies of blame avoidance are used

Blame Avoidance effects of using blame avoidance strategies when implementing unpopular reforms?

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