
The Blame Game

SPIN, BUREAUCRACY, AND
SELF-PRESERVATION IN GOVERNMENT

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Credit Claiming, Blame Avoidance, and Negativity Bias

There are ... more winners than losers [from extending free trade]. But it's the losers you see in the streets.

—Pascal Lamy, Director-General of the World Trade Organization, interviewed after international trade talks in Hong Kong in December 2005¹

The small group of journalists who shouted questions at the press secretary every day in the White House Briefing Room had a very different agenda [from that of Bill Clinton's spin doctors]. They were focused, almost fixated, on scandals, on ... malfeasance and misfeasance and plain old embarrassments.... They were interested in conflict ... in behind-the-scenes maneuvering....

—Howard Kurtz 1998: xix

STRIKING ATTITUDES AND OBSERVED PERFORMANCE: THREE PUZZLES ABOUT MODERN GOVERNANCE

You're riding on a city bus in the middle of a heat wave following a cold snap.² To everyone's extreme discomfort, the bus has its heating turned full on. You go to the obvious point of contact—the bus driver—to express your anger at this absurd state of affairs and ask for the heating to be shut off immediately. But you find the bus driver claims not to be to blame and says many of the buses in the city still have their heating on, because only the company mechanics can alter the heat settings on the buses. If you have the time and patience to pursue the matter further, you may find that the mechanics deny all blame as well, and tell you their labor union blames the company for not hiring enough mechanics to service the buses properly. But then you find the bus company managers blame the city's transport licensing authority for setting the fares for riders at a level that doesn't allow the company to hire more than a few mechanics. And the licensing authority says ...

Welcome to "blameworld" and the blame game. Most readers will have been there, in some form. The example given above might seem fairly trivial, though even that scenario might be life-threatening for some people.

But the same pattern can often be found in graver situations—for example, when large numbers of people lose their life savings or pension entitlement as a result of some policy change or company collapse, after years of careful saving for the future. So why do we find such a pattern so commonly repeated, in spite of decades of expert suggestions (Hirschmann 1981: 463) and high-flown rhetoric from reformers promising to make government and public services more customer-focused and better coordinated than before?

Similarly, why do we so often find the handling of risk in public services to be inflexible and unintelligent, often increasing our exposure to some kinds of risk in the name of reducing the incidence of others? Why does so little seem to come out of all those earnest reports, task forces, and government initiatives calling for imaginative, proportionate, results-focused regulation? For instance, how do we account for the sort of logic that causes rural railways to close down by insisting on unaffordable safety upgrades and thereby forces their erstwhile passengers to travel on the roads instead, with much higher risks of death and injury?³

Finally, when we get caught up in the aftermath of some unfortunate event that has taken its toll on our peace of mind, our bank balances, or even life and limb, why does responsibility so often prove to be extraordinarily elusive? Public organizations almost everywhere are exposed to successive reform and restructuring exercises purporting to clarify responsibility and improve accountability. So why do official and media inquiries after major failures time and time again find “smoking gun” evidence of who knew or did what when so hard to pin down?

These questions go to the heart of the conduct of modern executive government and public services, and this book argues that the answer to them lies in large part in the way blame avoidance shapes the conduct of officeholders, the architecture of organizations, and their operating routines and policies. It aims to dissect and describe some of the main strategies of blame avoidance, showing how they work and how they play into blame games. But it will also argue that blame avoidance, though often derided, can have positive as well as negative effects sometimes, raising the question of what should count as “good” or “bad” blame avoidance.

A KEY TO THE PUZZLE? THE LOGIC OF BLAMEWORLD

This book argues that there is a link between the types of behavior highlighted at the outset. The common thread is that they are all a product of the logic and politics of blame avoidance triumphing over the “good governance” bromides that pervade—or pollute, as some might say—modern government and public services. The mechanisms by which that sort of

triumph occurs are subtle, and they are to be found deep in the way organizations work and their members behave. The triumph is unintended, at least in the sense that it goes against the declared thrust of reform policies for government and public services for at least a generation. The blame-avoidance imperative applies as much, if not more, to the behavior of appointed officials in government as to that of elected politicians. It often extends to private or independent sector providers of public services too.

What we are dealing with here is a type of risk that seems curiously unmentionable in the official corporate lexicon of risk management—namely the risk of blame. And that is curious, because risk in general is anything but unmentionable in today's world.⁴ Indeed, over the last decade or so, risk has acquired all the conventional academic trappings of research centers, specialist journals, PhDs, and elaborately titled professorial chairs. In the business world it became central to the world of audit and corporate governance, in the attempt to control the kinds of failures that led to the great financial crash of 2008. In government it became the heart of a set of growing bureaucratic empires that regulate risks at work, environmental risks, food and drug risks, medical risks, financial risks, and many others besides, typically declaring their regulation to be “risk-based” in the sense that it purports to proportion the weight of regulatory action or monitoring to the perceived risks posed by different organizations, rather than treating all organizations equally.⁵

All that risk management activity in contemporary government and business has often been noticed, documented, and commented on.⁶ But most of it is officially concerned with risks to society or to corporate organizations. In contrast, this book puts the spotlight on the risk of personal blame faced by public officeholders, including politicians, managers, professionals, and front-line bureaucrats. That is a type of risk and risk management that is rather less commonly identified on the management-seminar circuit. And curiously—or tellingly—it does not have any conventional term-of-art label. We could call it “reputational risk,” one of the conventional categories of modern risk analysis, but that term is more often used for corporate brands rather than individual officeholders. We could call it “political risk,” but that term is conventionally used in the risk management industry to mean risks to which businesses or investors are exposed by government decisions that are adverse to them, for instance the likelihood of expropriation of property, predatory taxation, or obstructive regulation. So we shall simply call it “blame risk” for the purposes of this book.

Accordingly, this book puts blame risk in government and its associated organizations into the foreground and under the spotlight. By doing that, we can both become more aware of blame-avoidance practices across

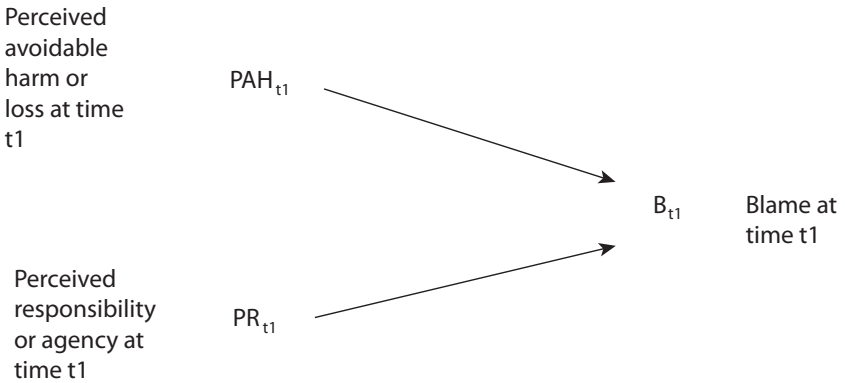


Figure 1.1. Two Key Elements of Blame. Source: Adapted from Sulitzeanu-Kenan and Hood 2005: 2.

the institutional world and start to find answers to some of those puzzles that we began with, about disjunctures between officially stated claims and observed behavior. That is because the management of blame risk—perhaps contrary to intention and usually in an unacknowledged way—so often shapes the organization and operation of modern executive government, producing its own curious logic of administrative architecture and policy operation.

So what exactly are blame and blame risk? Conventionally, blame is taken to mean the act of attributing something considered to be bad or wrong to some person or entity.⁷ And it therefore involves at least two components that are depicted in figure 1.1. One, denoted as PAH, is some element of perceived and avoidable harm or loss—something is seen as being worse for some person or group than it could have been if matters had been handled differently. A second, denoted as PR, is some attribution of agency—that harm was avoidable because it was caused by acts of omission or commission by some identifiable individual or organization or possibly some more abstract institution such as “capitalism” or “patriarchy” (Sulitzeanu-Kenan and Hood 2005: 3). Both of those components can vary according to the point in time when avoidable loss and agency are perceived.⁸ That aspect of blame may seem less obvious, but to see its relevance you need only think of all those cases where parents say to their children, “This may upset you now, but you’ll thank me for it later” (or words to that effect). Attempts to deflect blame often involve working on the time dimension, as well as on the agency and loss dimensions. And, as we shall see later, some forms of blame avoidance are anticipative—they involve efforts to “stop blame before it starts”—whereas others are reac-

tive, and involve operating in a fire-fighting mode after trouble has started.

Individuals can of course blame themselves for avoidable losses and harms (there is a substantial literature on self-blame in psychology), and indeed if you are alone on a desert island, you will have no one—or at least no human being—to blame but yourself. But as soon as there are at least two people on that desert island, blaming becomes a social or political activity, and that is the focus of this book. Blaming in that social sense is something that in principle extends across the whole spectrum of society from high-level potentates to the person in the street. Who you blame for what is a central marker of your culture and attitudes (Douglas 1990). As a social process, blaming must involve at least two sets of actors, namely blame makers (those who do the blaming) and blame takers (those who are on the receiving end). Those two roles come together in “blame games”—a term that came to be heavily used in the 2000s⁹—when multiple players are trying to pin the responsibility on one another for some adverse event, acting as blamers to avoid being blamees. And the consequences of blame can vary from mild social embarrassment to deep shame or extreme legal sanctions involving loss of life or liberty.

Blaming is often distinguished from “naming” and “claiming,” following a well-known sociological account of the emergence of legal disputes, developed by William Felstiner and his colleagues (1980) thirty years ago. In that analysis (Felstiner et al. 1980: 635), naming means the identification and recognition of some experience as injurious. Examples include Gulf War syndrome, repetitive strain injury, pension mis-selling, subprime lending. Such naming is a necessary first step for blaming, which is the attribution of responsibility for injurious experience (to departments of defense, employers, and banks in the examples given above). The Felstiner scheme is thus another way of identifying perception of avoidable loss and attribution of agency as central elements in blaming. And in the Felstiner analysis, blaming is in turn a necessary precursor for claiming in the sense of seeking some remedy from the individual or entity held to be responsible. The claiming can range from demands for explanation to monetary compensation, the resignation or dismissal of those who are culpable, or official expressions of sorrow ranging from corporate apologies to more or less drastic acts of contrition by individual officeholders.

Why—or when—should public officeholders care about the risk of blame? On the face of it, that might seem an odd question. After all, most of us as human beings can be expected to care about blame simply because wanting to be well thought of is a normal psychological trait. Beyond that, public officeholders have obvious reasons for concern with management of blame. Elected politicians will care about blame if they think it will reduce their chances of re-election. Managers will care about

blame if they think it will reduce their prospects of promotion, bonuses, staying in their current jobs, or moving on to better ones. Professionals will care about blame if they think it will diminish their reputations in ways that could damage their careers or produce expensive lawsuits over malpractice. Front-line bureaucrats will care about blame if they think it will cost them their jobs or their bonuses or their chances of promotion, or bust them back down to the ranks.

Even so, not everyone can be expected to care equally about all types of blame in all circumstances. After all, that psychological need to be well thought of and therefore to avoid blame is not equally distributed in human populations. Some personality types seem to have less concern to avoid blame than others, as in the case of psychopaths who do not exhibit the “usual” sense of moral responsibility (Elliott 1992). At the other end of the scale are those whose lives can be shattered by the smallest damage to their reputations. Our aversion to blame may vary over the course of our lives as well. We will be more motivated to engage in efforts to avoid blame the more likely we think blame will occur and the more serious we think the consequences will be for us if we do come to be blamed.

Variations in concern about blame are not just a matter of individual personality. Social settings and institutional background also seem to play a part. In so-called blame cultures, when every trifling error is watched for and the least step out of line pounced upon, there will be more pressure to avoid blame than in social settings where there is higher tolerance of others’ faults and failings, such as therapy groups for those suffering from addiction or intimate gatherings of old friends.

Indeed, there is a whole literature on “high-reliability organization” (for example, Sagan 1993) that makes much of the idea that concentration on blame varies from one kind of organization to another. In politics and government bureaucracy too, concern with blame is likely to vary with circumstances. A politician who has just won a landslide victory or is about to retire from office is likely to be less concerned with blame than one on the eve of an election in a close race. Similarly, a judge or bureaucrat (or professor) whose continuing tenure does not depend on re-election or reappointment can normally afford to be more relaxed about blame than one in different circumstances.

So the importance of blame risk is not a constant but a variable, and that variability may explain the extent to which we can observe behavior of the type highlighted at the outset (that is, defensive lack of integration among organizations, defensively disproportionate regulation, defensively vague accountability trails). If social developments make blame risk more or less salient over time, we might expect the incidence of such behavior to vary accordingly. And we might expect exceptions to such defensive

behavior to be found in those cases where individual personality, social setting, and institutional conditions put the least premium on avoiding blame. The next section explores that issue a little further, and we shall be returning to it later in this book.

CLAIMING CREDIT VERSUS AVOIDING BLAME: NEGATIVITY BIAS

The opposite of blame is credit, and we can define credit as the act of attributing something considered to be good or positive to a person or entity. Just like blame, credit is also directional, temporal, and based on perceptions of gain, so we can turn Felstiner and colleagues' analysis around and say that "naming" and "claiming" are necessary conditions for gaining credit in exactly the same way that they are for attracting blame. So politicians, organizational leaders, and governments are normally concerned with painting a relentlessly upbeat picture of progress and improvement within their domains of responsibility and with associating any such progress with their own personal sagacity and hard work (rather than sheer luck or benign environmental conditions). Such players can be expected to seek credit for exactly the same reason that they will want to avoid blame—because credit can be expected to increase their chances of re-election, reappointment, promotion, and favorable repute during or even after their lifetimes.

But what if the chance of credit has to be weighed against the risk of blame? After all, that happens all the time in politics, in bureaucracy, and indeed in most areas of our lives. A new scheme that is successful can bring credit to its promoters, but if it flops they are likely to face blame instead. So when politicians and bureaucrats are considering courses of action involving both the chance of credit and the risk of blame, their attitudes to risk come onto center stage. Again, we can assume that risk preferences are likely to vary in the population, with some people more prepared than others to risk blame for a chance of credit. But psychologists have often noticed that risk preferences in aggregate tend to be asymmetric in human decision making.

By that is meant that potential losses are commonly weighted more heavily than equivalent gains, and (as noted in the first epigraph) losers are more likely to notice and act on the basis of their potential or actual losses than gainers are to notice and act on equivalent gains. That is a phenomenon that goes under various names, one of which is "negativity bias." Negativity bias denotes a commonly observed cognitive tendency for more attention to be paid to negative than to positive information and for losses to be valued more highly than gains of an equivalent amount.¹⁰ The causes of negativity bias are debated (notably as between competing

“figure-ground” and “loss aversion” explanations), but the existence of the phenomenon is well established and several studies have suggested that losses are commonly weighted at between two and four times more than equivalent gains (see Heath et al. 1999).

Negativity bias has been found in various forms in politics and government. Indeed, it has been said that politics is at its purest when action is prompted more by hatred of enemies than by attachment to friends (Carr 2009). Dissatisfaction is often said to produce proportionately higher levels of activity and changes in allegiance than corresponding levels of satisfaction. For instance, some voting studies have revealed that dissatisfied voters are more likely to turn out to vote than satisfied voters and to switch their vote among parties (see, for instance, Kernell 1977), though the claim that dissatisfied voters are more likely to turn out has been contested by others (see, for instance, Radcliff 1994). We occasionally see groups out in the streets celebrating what they see as just punishment of offenders, but protests against allegedly unjust punishment or imprisonment are far more common. It is often said that political failures tend to be remembered more than successes,¹¹ and indeed politicians often turn out to get less credit from the voters for their successes than the blame they get for failures.

For example, Olivier Borraz (2007: 226), analyzing the response to rising concerns in France in the 1990s about the traditional practice of using urban sewage sludge for agriculture, uncovered little evidence of any electoral payoffs for the local authorities who handled the issue well, finding only punishments for those who failed dramatically. Oliver James and Peter John (2007) found something similar when they looked at local government election results in England in the early 2000s as against performance data produced by the Audit Commission, the official audit and rating agency for municipal services. They found that incumbent politicians tended to be punished by the voters for exceptionally poor performance on those indicators, but were not correspondingly rewarded for exceptionally good performance.

Negativity bias is also often said to be institutionalized in news media, as is illustrated in the second epigraph to this chapter, quoted from Howard Kurtz’s account of President Bill Clinton’s once-legendary propaganda machine. Long before that, Spiro Agnew, vice president of the United States under Richard Nixon until forced to resign in 1973 over financial irregularities during his time as governor of Maryland, repeatedly attacked media negativism, famously dubbing the press “nattering nabobs of negativism” on one occasion in 1970 (Morrow 1996). Alastair Campbell, chief spin doctor to Prime Minister Tony Blair, often expressed similar frustrations in his diaries about what he saw as the tendency of the Brit-

ish press to focus on the negatives rather than on the good news stories coming out of government. For example, on one particular day early in the Blair government, Campbell noted in exasperation, “You had Ireland, public sector pay, welfare, serious issues and they went on endlessly about his [Robin Cook’s] bloody secretary” (Campbell and Stott 2007: 273).¹²

The media are said to shape negativity bias by amplification of figure-ground effects (in this case, by foregrounding what is perceived to be negative and backgrounding the positive). That process is highlighted by Roger Kasperson’s (1992) controversial notion of “social amplification of risk,”¹³ and the related idea that media tend to expose society to more information that decreases trust or reduces credit than to information that increases trust and credit (Koren and Klein 1991). Indeed, as in the Alastair Campbell quote given above, politicians and their entourages often rage against what they see as a systematic tendency for media to ignore their successes and focus on their failures.

Negativity bias is often at the heart of bureaucratic behavior too. Some twenty-five years ago, Matthew McCubbins and Thomas Schwartz (1984) famously argued that, far from being helpless amateurs when it came to controlling bureaucracy, as some earlier theorists of bureaucratic power had suggested, the United States Congress could achieve effective control by acting on what they called the principle of “fire alarms” rather than “police patrols”—that is, focusing on things that go wrong rather than those that are working satisfactorily. The argument was that by working in that way legislators could avoid what would otherwise be very high monitoring costs in keeping tabs on large complicated organizations. And such behavior by legislators is readily observable in many other countries too, with much less scrutiny being applied to the successes of executive government than to its alleged failures and foul-ups.

What McCubbins and Schwartz did not point out was the bias that such a system of control introduces into bureaucratic incentives, because it means that success is ignored while failure gets all the attention from the legislature. So it is no wonder that bureaucrats are often found to show biases towards what is loosely called “risk aversion.” A German federal bureaucrat I interviewed with a colleague some years ago put the point graphically: “In this kind of bureaucracy, the mechanisms are harsh. For good initiatives one receives some praise (‘OK, not bad, but could have been done better’) but when it *geht in die Hose* [“goes down the toilet,” loosely translated] ... it is a disaster. In politics, a good initiative appears once in the newspaper and if one is extremely successful then our industry has an additional growth rate of 0.2 per cent. Nobody notices it. [But] a politician is remembered for ten years if there is a flop. That is why we are very risk averse here” (Hood and Lodge 2006: 102). Negativity

bias in the form of fire-alarm controls by the legislature will tend to produce a mediocrity bias in those they control. Often it seems to pay better to be average than to be excellent.

So negativity bias may help us to go at least some way in understanding the puzzles we started with at the outset—the persistence of muddled and ambiguous relationships between public service organizations, the continuing triumph of rigid rules over intelligent flexibility, and the difficulty of establishing clear accountability when things go wrong, in spite of decades of good governance clichés inveighing against such things. Those forms of behavior start to make perfect sense once they are understood as the product of a persistent logic of defensive behavior to avoid blame in government and public services. Complex partnership and subcontracting arrangements may or may not deliver better public services on the ground than simpler, more easily understandable organizational arrangements. But what they can do is spread the blame when things go wrong. Rigid rules may or may not make for a safer society than the application of common sense. But what they can do is help to protect those applying the rules from blame for using discretion that turns out to be wrong. Crooked and ambiguous accountability trails may not serve democracy or good governance. But they can protect the political and administrative class from blame after failure. In a society whose politics and government exhibited strong negativity bias, isn't that precisely how we would expect politicians and bureaucrats at every level to behave?

Even so, there are several important things we don't know about negativity bias in government. One is why technocrats and even experienced politicians often come to grief because they underestimate the effects of such bias. As our first epigraph recalls, negativity bias is the reef on which international trade talks often falter, even if, as is claimed there, there might be more winners than losers from liberalizing world trade. Margaret Thatcher's remarkable reign as Prime Minister of the United Kingdom came to an abrupt end after she failed to calculate that the losers from the poll tax, a short-lived new form of local taxation she introduced in Britain in 1989, would prove to be far more voluble than those who had benefited from the shift to that system of taxation from the previous one (Butler, Adonis, and Travers 1994). And the long career of Jacques Chirac in French politics never recovered after he failed to calculate that a referendum on a new European constitution in 2005 would act as a catalyst for everyone in France who was discontented with his rule rather than a grateful endorsement of a new grand vision of European unity. How are we to explain why such seasoned and successful politicians sometimes fail to leave negativity bias out of their calculations? Is it a case of "positive illusion"—the sort of unrealistic exaggeration of their ability or strength that humans are sometimes prone to and that is often said to lead to traf-

fic accidents and even the outbreak of wars? (See, for example, Armor et al. 2002; Taylor and Brown 1994.) Or are such cases the exceptions that prove the rule?

Second, negativity bias does not always seem to sweep all before it. There must be some other and countervailing behavioral processes that work to limit such bias, or trust of any kind would seldom or ever exist or survive.¹⁴ Moreover, as we shall see later, governments, public managers, and political leaders put a lot of effort into countering negativity bias. In fact, in their constant search for ways to accentuate the positive, modern governments and public managers put out stirring tales of achievement, facts and figures about their claimed successes, and carefully selected research findings that support their positions and reform programs. Nor is such behavior entirely new: in the late, and by some lamented, Soviet Union, government broadcasts gave an endlessly upbeat picture of life in the workers' state, in their ultimately vain attempt to counter the cynicism and disillusion of the population at large about the conduct of their rulers.

Moreover, government reform programs often include strong aspirations to counter excessive blame aversion in public administration through red-tape-busting activity—for instance, in attempts to reduce the incidence of back-covering checking processes inside government, or to assess the worth of extra regulatory burdens against the risks or mischiefs they are intended to reduce. As noted earlier, a whole new bureaucratic language and practice of risk management has emerged, sharing at least its vocabulary with business practice, to balance desires to avoid blame if things go wrong against cost and other desiderata. (But it is at least an open question as to whether such mechanisms in practice counter or augment blame-avoidance imperatives in government.) Are such activities to be best understood as no more than symbolic activity, like buying one of those New Age crystal pendants said to counter “negativity?”¹⁵ Or can they have positive payoffs?

A final thing we do not know about negativity bias is to what extent it is some sort of constant in human affairs, and to what degree its strength depends on circumstances, as mentioned earlier. Is it a relatively unchanging feature of human behavior that is hard-wired into our cognitive processes as a result of millions of years of evolutionary selection (programming us to focus on threats and dangers to our survival, while taking the positives for granted)? Or is it a product of a particular kind of society or culture? We have little direct survey evidence for changing negativity bias (let alone any developed “negativity bias index”). But some observers, notably Kent Weaver (1986 and 1988), have claimed that political negativity bias increased in several ways in the United States and other developed democracies in the 1970s and 1980s.

Indeed, Frank Furedi has written of the rise of “fear entrepreneurs” in modern societies, arguing that “the politics of fear appears to dominate public life in Western societies” (Furedi 2005: 1), and that the unchecked promotion of fear by politicians, experts, and special interest groups has become a marked feature of the age.¹⁶ In a more institutional vein, Dan Kelemen (2006) has argued that, despite pious aspirations to the “open method of coordination,” the European Union’s institutional structure has strong built-in incentives for the growth of adversarial legalism. And John Dryzek (1996) has commented in a similar vein on the development of the “risk industry” in a number of developed countries. Such ideas suggest that negativity bias can be encouraged and reinforced by institutional, technological, and social factors. If actual or potential loss tends to attract more political, legal and legislative activity than equivalent gains (for instance, if victims are easier to mobilize than beneficiaries, or compensation claims more readily attuned to legal and policy entrepreneurship than feelings of contentment or gratitude), the more focus there will tend to be on potential instances of failure, malfeasance, and avoidable risk.

Similarly, the more journalists, lobbyists, scientific experts, compensation lawyers, elected politicians, and their sidekicks there are (and the proportionate growth of all these actors is indeed a marked feature of modern developed societies), the greater will be the demand to discover and act upon such instances. If that is the case—and we will be exploring such issues further in later chapters—we might expect to find increasing investment by governments and bureaucrats in blame-avoidance activity, and indeed a tendency toward growth, rather than any decrease, in the sort of behavior we noted at the outset.

BLAME AVOIDANCE AS CRAFT AND SCIENCE

So if negativity bias produces a strong drive to avoid blame in public services and government, even sometimes at the cost of claiming credit, what strategies are available to politicians and bureaucrats in their quest for a blameless existence, and how well do they work? We might expect there to be a large and well developed literature on this subject, and academies running master classes to help would-be practitioners from politics and government develop that perfect Teflon strategy for preventing blame from sticking to them.

But actually blame avoidance has a curiously low profile as a field of study. It is largely a craft activity, self-taught or picked up in an informal way as politicians, bureaucrats, and spin doctors learn by doing to practice their art. That means that most of its “professors” do not have con-

ventional academic titles or university chairs. Not only is the craft separated from the science, but the science itself tends to lack a clear central node.

The academic study of blame avoidance consists of a diffuse body of writing and analysis that is scattered across numerous disciplines including psychology, political science, philosophy, sociology, and institutional economics, and indeed tends to live at the edges of each of those disciplines. Some of it is new and some of it is old, because scholars were analyzing the phenomenon *avant la lettre*, long before the term “blame avoidance” came into currency. For instance, as we shall see later, Niccolo Machiavelli anticipated modern analysis of delegation as a strategy of blame avoidance by some four centuries, and Jeremy Bentham was discussing negativity bias in the early nineteenth century.

However, the modern development of this approach seems to have started in the United States in the 1980s, with the work of a leading institutional scholar, Kent Weaver, to whom we have already referred. Weaver drew heavily on the idea of negativity bias, and he argued that elected politicians in the United States often tended to prefer avoiding blame over claiming credit. The 1980s and early 1990s also saw complementary developments in social psychology and “rational choice theory” about institutions and politics, with the classic work of Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky (1979) on risk asymmetry, the analysis of the politics of delegation by leading scholars like Morris Fiorina (1982 and 1986) and Murray Horn (1995), and work at the borderline of political science and social psychology, notably Kathleen McGraw’s (1990) experimental work on excuses and justifications by politicians facing blame.

Historians always want to look at ideas in their context, and readers may well ask what precisely was it in the social and political background that prompted such intellectual developments in the United States at that time? Intriguing as it is, that is a question that has barely been asked, let alone answered. Was it something to do with the way American politics developed after the debacle of the Vietnam war? Was it something to do with “partisan dealignment” (the term conventionally used to mean a reduction in the fixity of attachments by voters to political parties) that started to take place in electoral politics in the 1960s? Was it something to do with the growth of federal government activity associated with developments such as the War on Poverty of the 1960s? Could it have been a mixture of all three, or maybe even none of the above? We don’t really know. But in the twenty-odd years since Kent Weaver’s article and book appeared, political scientists have worked on the blame-avoidance perspective in at least three ways.

First, there have been numerous investigations of the ways that office-holders in democratic political systems can limit their career risks of being

punished by voters for the pursuit of unpopular policies that may expose some of their voters to more risk (particularly when they are making cut-backs in welfare entitlements such as state retirement pension benefits while often at the very same time increasing the welfare benefits going to the political class). How can we explain how governments can do such things to their voters and still manage to avoid electoral wipeouts? The answer, according to such studies, takes us into recondite questions of constitutional and institutional architecture, policy program structuring and political tactics in party competition, and framing and packaging policy.¹⁷

Second, a new generation of scholars has tried to take the study of blame avoidance beyond circumstantial evidence and telling anecdotes. Some have followed the experimental approach pioneered in this field by Kathleen McGraw (1990), as with Raanan Sulitzeanu-Kenan's (2006) exploration of the effect of public inquiries on blame attribution for hypothetical policy failures. Some scholars have also tried to track policy actions and public opinion systematically over time (Jennings 2004 and 2009; Sulitzeanu-Kenan 2007; Hood et al. 2009). And third, the blame-avoidance perspective has been applied specifically to the management of health and financial risks, for instance in the work of Julia Black (2005) on risk-based approaches to financial regulation taken by the British Financial Services Authority in the early 2000s. Other scholars working on the regulation of health and social risks (such as White 2009; Hood, Rothstein, and Baldwin 2001) have developed a similar analysis, in showing how the management of such risks links to the career risks of politicians and public servants at various levels.

Indeed, the blame-avoidance perspective cuts across three different strands of political science that are normally separated—namely the analysis of institutional architectonics (why institutions are designed the way that they are), the analysis of policy processes (how policies play out at all stages from their emergence onto the decision agenda down to the way they operate on the ground), and the analysis of the working of electoral processes and public opinion. In fact, all of those different analytic strands are needed to explore the questions we posed at the outset, about why organizations often don't connect in policy delivery, why rigidity often trumps flexibility and proportionality in organizational functioning, and why opacity tends to trump clarity in accountability after policy fiascos. So we will be drawing on each of those three strands in the rest of the book.

THREE STRATEGIES FOR BLAME AVOIDANCE

In the traditional study of rhetoric, the art of persuasion, much effort went into categorizing and classifying different forms of argument (or substi-

tutes for argument).¹⁸ As yet we have no corresponding definitive categorization of blame-avoidance strategies to show for the twenty years or so since the term began to come into currency in political science and other fields. But in that scattered literature, we can identify three main strategies for deflecting or avoiding blame (see Hood 2002; Sulitzeanu-Kenan and Hood 2005). They are here termed presentational strategies, agency strategies, and policy strategies. The basics of each of those three strategies are summarized in table 1.1 and will be explored more fully as the book goes on.

Presentational strategies deal mainly with the loss or harm perception dimension of blame, but may also work on the time element to have an effect. *Agency strategies* deal mainly with the perceived agency dimension of blame that was discussed above (that is, the issue of who or what can be held responsible for what someone sees as avoidable harm). But such strategies can also approach the blame-avoidance problem by focusing on the time element—for instance, by revolving-door systems for moving officeholders on, so that by the time blame comes home to roost, someone else is in the hot seat. *Policy strategies* also deal mainly with the agency dimension and the time element. But they work through different means, namely through the overall architecture of policy and the standard operating routines that organizations follow rather than with distribution of responsibility in an organizational structure.

Thus, as table 1.1 suggests, “presentational strategies” involve various ways of trying to avoid blame by spin, stage management, and argument. The presentational strategist aims to work on the loss or harm perception dimension of blame, for example by accentuating the positive to counter negativity bias, and focuses primarily on what information to offer, when and how. Presentational strategists aim to find ways of showing that what might be perceived as a blameworthy problem is in fact a blessing in disguise, for instance as short-term pain that will produce long-term gain. They may also search for plausible excuses to mitigate blame on the part of particular officeholders, at the point where loss perception and agency meet. They may actively create diversions or at least contrive to time unpopular announcements at times of minimum public attention, with measures such as increases in politicians’ pay sneaked out on public holidays or at a time when media attention is focused on some other big event.

The analysis of presentational strategies takes us into those parts of political science and related fields that are concerned with the framing of arguments, the rhetorical dimension of politics and management, the dynamics of public attitudes and opinion, and the links between media and politics. The former British prime minister Harold (later Lord) Wilson is claimed to have said that “most of politics is presentation, and

TABLE 1.1
Three Types of Blame-Avoidance Strategy

	<i>Aspect of blame dealt with</i>	<i>Works on</i>	<i>Example</i>	<i>Assume</i>
Presentational strategies (Slogan: “ <i>Spin your way out of trouble</i> ”)	Loss or harm perception and time	Arguments for limiting blame (excuses) or turning blame into credit (justifications) and other methods of shaping public impressions	Shaping of public perceptions through news management	Presentational activity will limit or deflect rather than exacerbate or attract blame
Agency strategies (Slogan: “ <i>Find a scapegoat</i> ”)	Agency perception and time	Distribution of formal responsibility, competency, or jurisdiction among institutions and officeholders in space or time	Formal delegation of potentially blameworthy tasks to “lightning rods”	Formal allocation of organizational responsibility is sufficiently credible and salient to last through blame firestorms
Policy strategies (Slogan: “ <i>Don’t make contestable judgments that create losers</i> ”)	Agency perception and time	Selection of policies or operating routines to minimize risk of institutional or individual liability or blame	Protocolization and automaticity to remove or minimize the exercise of individual discretion by officeholders	There is a low- or no-blame option (e.g., in choosing between errors of commission and errors of omission or between opting for automaticity and opting for discretion)

Source: Developed from Hood (2002).

what isn't is timing" (Jones 1993: 73), and presentational strategies have attracted much attention in the current age of "spinocracy." The idea of a "spinocracy"—rule by spin doctors—implies the rise to power of a so-called media class, in the form of armies of flak-catchers and public relations professionals or bureaucrats in central and influential positions in all forms of government and public organizations because of their supposed expertise in shaping media debate and public perceptions (see Kurtz 1998; Jones 1996 and 1999; Osborne 1999). And, whether or not spinocracy is as new as some of that breathless commentary suggests, it is true that after a crisis has struck, presentation is typically the main strategy for blame avoidance available to beleaguered officeholders.

By contrast, agency strategies involve various ways of trying to avoid blame by the way lines of formal responsibility are drawn in government and public services. The agency strategist aims to work on the responsibility perception dimension of blame and focuses primarily on government's organogram and on who occupies what position within it at what time. One important strain in agency strategy involves efforts by officeholders to delegate activities that will attract blame while retaining in their own hands the activities that will earn credit. Other ways to diffuse blame include partnership working, multi-agency arrangements, or institutional machinery so complex that blame can be shuffled about or made to disappear. As we shall see, organizations often engage in processes of defensive reorganization and revolving-door movement of officeholders, so that by the time blame comes home to roost, the organizational structure that produced the perceived harm has long been superseded and the relevant individuals have all moved out or on, leaving frustrated media and campaigners with no heads available to stick on spikes.

The analysis of agency strategies takes us into the traditional study of public administration—that part of political science that is concerned with all the details of how executive government is organized, including its use of private and independent organizations in partnership or delegation arrangements for public service provision. And as we shall see later, the blame-avoidance perspective may offer us one way of making sense of the much-remarked development of semi-autonomous public bodies, multi-level governance, and partnership arrangements in modern (and not so modern) government. It may also help to explain why elected politicians and senior bureaucrats often seem to spend a remarkable amount of their time on the fine print of organizational design while often professing that all they care about is "results."¹⁹

Policy strategies, also noted in table 1.1, are ways of trying to avoid blame by the processes that are followed in decision-making or by the substance of what officeholders do, rather than concentrating on the presentation of actions or outcomes, or on who is placed in the front line of

responsibility for policy and operations. Policy strategists aim to work on the agency dimension and the time element by choosing policies or procedures that expose themselves to the least possible risk of blame. As we shall see later, there are various possible ways they can choose to do that. When it comes to more or less inevitably unpopular policies such as raising taxes or paying salaries and allowances to politicians, they may choose to rely as far as possible on following whatever they have inherited, so that blame attaches as much to their predecessors in office as to themselves. In addition, they may seek to replace human judgment and the blame it can attract by following automatic formulae.

Commonly observable examples of the latter approach include formula-driven rather than discretionary budget allocations, rigid protocols rather than independent professional judgment in casework decisions, checklist or tick-box approaches rather than qualitative assessment (such as computer-marked multiple-choice tests rather than essays judged in the round by teachers), computer-based decision algorithms rather than direct human contact. Or policy strategies may simply choose to abandon activities that may attract blame (such as the giving of advice or provision of public recreational facilities) rather than relying on being able to spin their way out of trouble or on shifting the responsibility around.

Policy strategies are not institutionalized in the same way as agency strategies or presentational strategies, so the analysis of policy strategies has to be conducted in a rather different way, as we shall see later in this book. We have to look at selective cases rather than at general indicators of development. But the greater the real or perceived negativity bias in the population at large or the particular culture in question, the more policy is likely to be dominated by such defensive approaches all the way down the food chain of executive government and public services. And policy strategies may be the blame-avoidance strategy of choice when agency strategies are not available—for example, by those to whom blameworthy activity comes to be delegated and who cannot delegate it further.

These three types of blame-avoidance strategy, which are summarized in table 1.1 and all of which are recognizable in the literature on public policy, are not claimed to exhaust all the possible approaches to avoiding or limiting blame. Nor are they claimed to be mutually exclusive or jointly exhaustive. They merely represent the most commonly discussed elements in the scattered literature on the topic. We can perhaps think of them as elements of a Venn diagram, a common representation of three separate circles that overlap at the margins, and they are presented as such in figure 1.2. One of the obvious areas of overlap consists of those cases where policy or agency strategies are so plastic (that is, easily changed, ambiguous, lacking clear exposition) that they are hardly distinguishable from presentational strategies. Cases of that kind include those instances

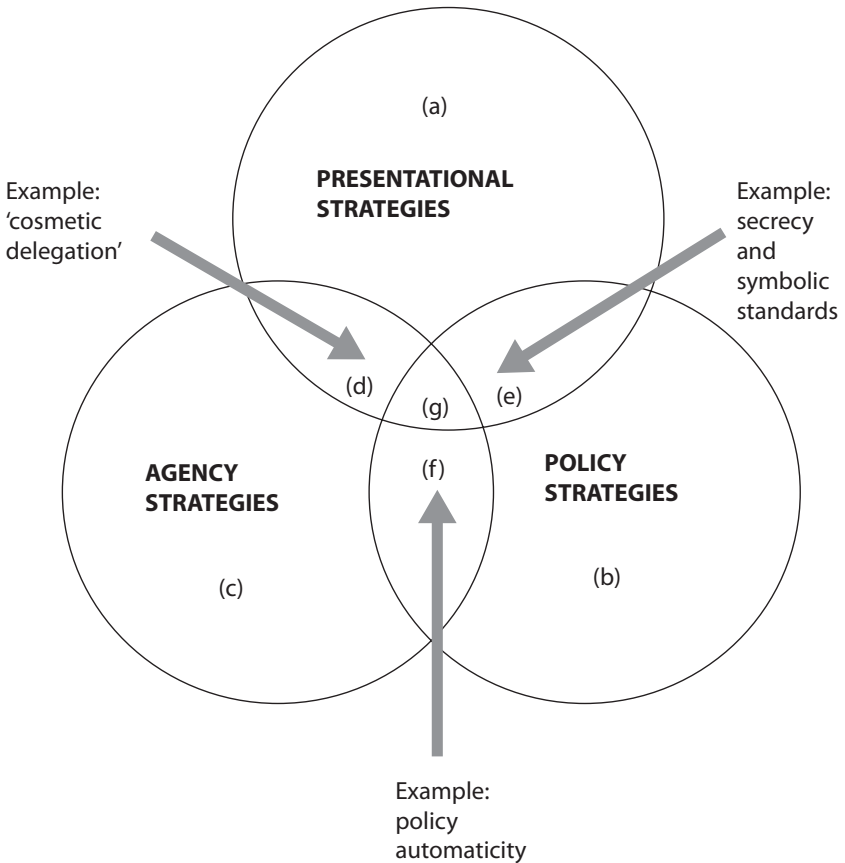


Figure 1.2. Some Hybrids of Blame-Avoidance Strategy.

where the arrangement of responsibilities among organizations or office-holders are so soft that they can be spun at will or where policies and procedures are capable of being interpreted in widely different ways, such that they too are not distinguishable from presentational strategies.

Moreover, as table 1.1 indicates, each of those three approaches to blame avoidance tends to have built-in limits. Agency strategies will reach their limits when formally declared lines of responsibility turn out not to be credible with the relevant public—for example, when voters still blame presidents or ministers even when activities are officially said to be delegated to or shared with other organizations. Presentational strategies, as we shall see later, reach their limits when spin doctors and their devious arts start to serve as blame magnets rather than blame deflectors. And policy strategies reach their limits when there turns out to be no blame-free

position or procedure available, as at the point where errors of commission attract much the same amount of blame as errors of omission. But to say that any strategy has its limits is not to say that it cannot be used effectively within some range or in a suitable social context, and each of these types of strategy merits attention in the analysis of blame avoidance.

DEVELOPING THE ANALYSIS

Now that we have sketched out the blame-avoidance perspective and the kinds of behavior it may be able to explain in government and public service organizations, the chapters that follow aim to develop the analysis.

The next chapter aims to explore four different “worlds” of blame avoidance, distinguishing the world occupied by those in the highest offices (the top bananas), those who are in the front line of organizations or public services, and the meat in the organizational sandwich—everyone in the middle between the top officeholders and those in the front line. And a fourth world comprises those who are neither officeholders nor service providers, who can find themselves both on the giving and receiving end of blame. The blame game—the politics of blame avoidance—can be understood as a process of interaction among the players in these different worlds, as they combine or conflict and seek to pass the blame onto those in the other worlds.

Following that account of different blame-avoidance worlds, the next part of the book delves into the three blame-avoidance strategies sketched out above. We devote a chapter to each of them, exploring some of the variations around each theme and exploring some of the ways that each of these approaches have developed over time. We can think of this part of the book as an exercise in “naming the parts” of blame-avoidance approaches, as military recruits have traditionally been trained to do with their weapons (see *Finer 1970: x*) and medical students with human bones—analysis in the original sense of breaking something down into its various components. Of course this naming of parts is not exactly like identifying the bones of the foot or the parts of a gun, but it nevertheless consists of identifying three broad strategies of blame avoidance and then sketching out some of the different approaches that can be found within each broad strategy.

Thus in chapter 3, we explore presentational strategies, distinguishing those approaches that concentrate on winning arguments from those that concentrate on changing the subject, and differentiating those that involve invisibility or inaction (“taking the Fifth Amendment”²⁰) from those that involve preemptive apologies designed to deflect blame or head off major accountability. In chapter 4, we turn to agency strategies and go

into practices of hard and soft delegation, various types of responsibility-sharing through partnerships, and officeholder rotation. In chapter 5, we explore policy or operational strategies, looking at forms of protocolization (playing it by the book), varieties of group decision-making (staying with the herd), service avoidance (avoiding blame by not providing service in risky cases, as in the case of doctors not taking on high-risk patients), and ways of passing blame onto individuals, for instance by all those small-print disclaimers that put all the responsibility onto the individual recipient of service rather than on the service provider.

Then, following this analysis of the anatomy and development of blame-avoidance strategies, the next part of the book turns to the analysis of how those strategies can be mixed and matched and what institutional developments can be observed over time. Chapter 6 explores the dynamics, looking for clues as to whether the mix of the various approaches discussed in the previous three chapters is changing over time or that the amount of time and money invested in each of them is altering. For example, behind the high-flown rhetoric of liberal democracy, is government today drifting into a style of officeholding and organizational behavior that emphasizes neither steering nor rowing,²¹ but rather blaming everyone else? Chapter 7 then turns to the mixing-and-matching issue, asking whether any combination of strategies can be successful or whether there are some strategies and variants that mix better than others, and whether there are limits on the way different blame-avoidance strategies can be sequenced when individuals or organizations are under blame pressure.

Finally, in chapters 8 and 9, the book returns to the themes we began with in this chapter and explores what the effects of blame-avoidance strategies are on modern executive government, what unintended effects they may produce on public policy, and to what extent they are to be welcomed or deplored as a shaper of government institutions and behavior. How effective are blame-avoidance strategies in keeping blame at bay, and whether or not they work, does the pursuit of such strategies improve or undermine the quality of governance in the sense of rigorous policy debate, sharp accountability, and transparent organization and policy process? And to the extent that the pursuit of blame avoidance can be problematic—as the opening examples in this chapter suggest—are there remedies available to limit the more negative aspects of blame avoidance dominating the behavior of executive government?