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The Politics of Blame Avoidance*

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ABSTRACT

Politicians are motivated primarily by the desire to avoid blame for unpopular actions rather than by seeking to claim credit for popular ones. This results from voters' 'negativity bias': their tendency to be more sensitive to real or potential losses than they are to gains. Incentives to avoid blame lead politicians to adopt a distinctive set of political strategies, including agenda limitation, scapegoating, 'passing the buck' and defection ('jumping on the bandwagon') that are different than those they would follow if they were primarily interested in pursuing good policy or maximizing credit-claiming opportunities. These strategies in turn lead to important policy effects, including a surrender of discretion even when it offers important credit-claiming opportunities.

Every time I fill an office, I create a hundred malcontents and one ingrate.

-Louis XIV

One of the most important and least studied trends in modern government is the move toward increased 'automaticity' – i.e., self-limitation of discretion by policymakers. Examples of this process are manifold. Discretion over benefit levels in many income transfer programs has been replaced by automatic adjustments for inflation (indexation). Civil service mechanisms have replaced patronage appointments as the major means of filling bureaucratic posts in most industrialized countries. Formula grants have replaced discretionary grants in transfers from central to local governments. More recently, automatic mechanisms have even been employed in budget-making, most notably in the Gramm-Rudman-Hollings budget cutting initiative in the United States.

The growth of discretion-limiting devices in government calls into serious question much of the accepted thinking about the way public

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policy is made. Policymakers are usually seen as seeking through their activities and votes to 'claim credit' with constituents and clientele groups for actions taken in their interests (Fiorina, 1977).

While credit-claiming is certainly a major component of policymakers' motivations, it is not the only one.¹ Policymakers may also have *non-electoral* motivations such as vote-trading. In countries with a relatively weak system of legislative party discipline, individual legislators may exchange votes on issues of low salience to themselves and their constituents for other legislators' votes on seemingly unrelated issues. Policymakers may also have 'good' policy motivations – i.e., they may act because they think an action is worthwhile even if it has no political payoff. And they may be guided by power considerations within their respective institutions – e.g., their party caucus, legislative chamber or committee, or agency (Fenno, 1973).

A second electoral motivation must also be considered, however. Policymakers are often placed in situations in which the opportunities to claim credit that discretion affords are simply not worth the associated political costs. As Louis XIV discovered in a non-electoral context, even choices that appear to offer substantial opportunities for credit-claiming can also create ill will from constituencies who feel themselves relatively or absolutely worse off as a result of a decision. Politicians must, therefore, be at least as interested in *avoiding blame* for (perceived or real) losses that they either imposed or acquiesced in as they are in 'claiming credit' for benefits they have granted.

Credit claiming, 'good policy' and blame-avoiding motivations all can influence policy decisions. But do they lead to differences in behavior? And which motivation is likely to dominate when they come into conflict? It will be argued here that blame avoidance leads to patterns of behavior very different from those suggested by the other motivations. Furthermore, when push comes to shove, most officeholders seek above all not to maximize the credit they receive but to minimize blame. In formal terms, they are not credit-claiming maximizers but blame minimizers and credit-claiming and 'good policy' satisficers.

This essay sketches out a theory of policy motivations, giving particular attention to blame-avoiding. Specifically, it addresses: (1) how blame avoidance differs from and interacts with the credit-claiming and 'good policy' motivations; (2) the situations in which blame-avoiding is most likely to occur; (3) the forces that have led to an increase in the relative importance of blame avoidance in recent years; (4) specific strategies that flow from blame-avoiding; (5) differences in the way that blame avoidance is manifested in the United States and in parliamentary systems; and (6) the consequences of blame avoidance for policy outputs and outcomes.

Blame-Avoiding as a Policy Motivation

This study will assume that most policymakers are motivated in large part by their desire to maximize their prospects for reelection (or reappointment) and advancement. It will, therefore, give primary attention to electoral motivations. But how can decisionmakers arrange their calculus to enhance their prospects of staying in office? As a starting point, we would expect decisionmakers to attempt to maximize gains realized by their constituents while minimizing losses – i.e., to take actions for which they can maximize credit and minimize blame.

This is not a simple calculation, however. Constituency costs and benefits do not translate directly into political gains and losses for officeholders. Constituents are much less likely to notice widely diffused costs or benefits than those that are relatively concentrated in a smaller group of the constituency; the former will probably be heavily discounted. And groups of constituents that are poorly organized and have few political resources are again likely to have policy effects relating to them heavily discounted.²

Taking these caveats into consideration, it might be argued that a policymaker will, given a range of policy alternatives, choose and strongly support the one that maximizes net constituency benefits (i.e., the surplus of concentrated benefits over concentrated costs) to his or her constituency. But even this formulation is still too simplistic. Pursuit of a constituency benefit maximizing, credit claiming strategy is rational only if constituents respond symmetrically to gains and losses – for example, if a dollar of income gained by one set of constituents as a result of a policymaker's actions wins as much support as a dollar lost to another group costs. But there is substantial evidence that this is not so (Kahneman and Tversky, 1984). Persons who have suffered losses are more likely to notice the loss, to feel aggrieved and to act on that grievance, than gainers are to act on the basis of their improved state.

In short, voters are more sensitive to what has done *to* them than to what has been done *for* them.³ Thus the concentrated losses to constituents need not outweigh benefits for a policymaker to have strong blame-avoiding incentives; it is enough that those costs are substantial. When this situation arises, policymakers will probably attempt not to maximize credit claiming net benefits but to minimize blame generating losses.

Much evidence suggests that constituencies are more sensitive to losses than to gains. Using aggregate time-series data for the United States, Bloom and Price (1975, p.1244) found that members of the incumbent President's party are likely to lose seats in Congress during recession, but an economic upturn does not have an equal reciprocal effect. They

conclude that ‘in bad times the economy becomes a salient issue, whereas in good times it diminishes in importance relative to other determinants of voting behavior.’⁴ Using individual-level data, Samuel Kernell (1977) found that in midterm Congressional elections, independent voters who disapprove of the President’s performance are more likely to vote, and to vote against the President’s party, than those who approve of his performance; party identifiers in the President’s party who disapprove of the President’s performance are more likely to defect to vote against that party than members of the other party who approve of his performance are to defect to support his party.

Disproportionate attention by constituents to questions on which they disagree with policymakers may occur on a variety of other fronts. Gerald Wright (1977) found that Republican supporters of President Nixon on the House Judiciary Committee that considered his impeachment received considerably fewer votes in the 1974 election than would otherwise have been anticipated; Nixon’s critics on the Committee did not receive a bonus, however.

The classic case of negativity bias on non-economic issues concerns gun control: opponents of stricter gun control are highly mobilized (primarily by the National Rifle Association), and because many of them view a legislator’s opposition to gun control as a vote-determining issue, they are able to exert electoral influence disproportionate to their numbers. Similarly, opponents of abortion or supporters of the proposed Equal Rights amendment to the US constitution might be more likely to see their legislator’s position on that issue as a salient, vote-determining issue if it disagrees with their own position than if it is consistent.

Interest groups have also discovered that they can use negativity biases as a tool in fund-raising for specific causes and candidates. By centring their appeal around the danger posed by a specific ‘devil-figure’ (e.g., Jesse Helms or Jane Fonda) or by raising the spectre of specific losses to the recipient (e.g., of Social Security benefits) they can focus blame while providing an immediate outlet – sending funds – for that blame.

Discounting by politicians of constituency gains (or positive evaluations) relative to losses (or negative evaluations) thus seems quite appropriate. While politicians always have incentives to avoid blame for constituency losses, discounting magnifies and sharpens these effects. Response to blame-avoiding incentives can lead to distinctive patterns of behavior by policymakers on at least three dimensions (Table 1). With respect to choices among policy options that offer differing combinations of social and political benefits, we would expect that policymakers motivated by ‘good policy’ reasoning would seek to maximize net social welfare, although they might disagree as to the exact meaning of that term. Credit-claiming decisionmakers, on the other hand, would focus on

TABLE 1: *Attitudinal Manifestations of Policymakers' Motivations*

Dimension:	Good Policy	Credit-Claiming	Blame-Avoiding
Attitude toward costs and benefits:	Maximize net benefits to society	Maximize surplus of concentrated (claimable) constituency benefits over losses	Minimize concentrated losses, even when it means sacrificing greater benefits
Attitude toward discretion:	Indifferent or opposed	Favorable	Suspicious
Attitude toward policy leadership:	Indifferent	Favorable	Suspicious

political impacts, and hence on the balance between concentrated gains and losses for groups relevant to them. Blame avoiders, finally, would also focus on political consequences, but they would tend to discount potential gains relative to losses in their calculus, and thus to minimize blame before being concerned with building political credit.

The three policy motivations also suggest differing behaviors with respect toward exercising policy leadership and policy discretion. A ‘good policy’ orientation would suggest indifference toward exercising policy leadership, because it is the substantive outcome rather than the political credit or blame that is associated with it that is valued. The same logic is true of maintaining policy discretion – indeed, policymakers may oppose discretion by themselves or others if they believe that it will lead to irresponsible policy choices. Credit-claimers, on the other hand, will seek to exercise policy leadership and maintain discretion because it allows them to make more credible claims for credit from their constituents. Blame-avoiders will be suspicious of exercising both discretion over policy and policy leadership, because these ‘opportunities’ may generate substantial blame as well as credit.

Blame avoidance can be manifested in several ways. Legislators, for example, may try to avoid having to make politically costly decisions or take clear policy positions at all. Failing that, they may vote in favor of legislation about which they have substantial doubts because it would be difficult to explain a contrary vote to their constituents. Or they may cede discretion to the president or an independent agency for making politically costly decisions.

Legislators do not have a monopoly on blame-avoiding, however. This behavior can be found among politicians of all types. Presidential candidates, for example, tend to be more ambiguous on issues where there is a substantial divergence of opinion, presumably because they are more

concerned about potential blame from those who might oppose any specific position than they are enticed by potential credit from those who agree with the position (Campbell, 1983; Shepsle, 1972; Page, 1976).

President Reagan's behavior toward Social Security through most of his tenure in office has been a classic example of blame-avoiding. In his first year of office, the administration floated a proposal for drastically cutting Social Security cost-of-living allowances (COLAs) for early retirees and delaying them for all recipients. When the plan was criticized, the President disassociated himself from it – i.e., he sought to avoid blame (Stockman, 1986: 187–192). At the beginning of his second term, Reagan said that he would accept cuts in those COLAs only if they were supported by an overwhelming bipartisan majority in Congress – that is, if others took most of the blame.

Blame avoidance does not always lead to ambiguity and inaction, however. If a president (or any other policymaker) is highly dependent upon a constituency that has come to expect change, he may feel compelled to go along. President Johnson's reasoning for his support of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, for example, had a distinctly blame-avoiding tone:

I knew that if I didn't get out in front of this issue . . . they [the liberals] would get me. They'd throw my background against me, they'd use it to prove that I was incapable of bringing unity to the land I have loved so much . . . I couldn't let that happen. I had to produce a civil rights bill that was even stronger than the one they'd have gotten if Kennedy had lived. Without this, I'd be dead before I could even begin. (quoted in Whalen and Whalen, 1985: 239)

Political appointees and bureaucrats in government agencies also seek to avoid blame. The Food and Drug Administration, for example, is often argued to have been overly restrictive in letting new drugs onto the market – prohibiting the use of drugs that would create some costs but greater gains – because of the huge blame-generating potential of another thalidomide case.

Blame avoiding has a different dynamic in the US judiciary because federal judges have lifetime tenure (except in extremely rare cases of impeachment). Thus while they might not like to be blamed for unpopular decisions, they can withstand blame better than legislators and elective and appointed officials in the executive branch. It was the desire to free judges, and judicial decisions, from such fears that led to their being given a constitutional guarantee of lifetime tenure in the first place. Although having decisions overturned by a higher court is an embarrassment most judges would prefer to avoid, it does not threaten a federal judge with unemployment. (Many state and municipal judges do not have this protection, however.) One reason that the federal courts

have been able to play an activist policymaking role in the United States over the past thirty years is this greater ability to withstand blame. The judiciary has stood firm in such areas as school prayer and abortion where legislators, subject to extreme blame-avoiding pressures, have attempted to reverse them.

Blame-avoiding motives do not always pose clear conflicts with the other motivations, however. Blame avoidance can also shape the way policymakers attempt to achieve their other objectives. For example, in the early 1970s, Republican lawmakers confronted Democratic initiatives in Congress to raise the real as well as nominal benefit levels for Social Security through ad hoc increases. These fiscal conservatives felt that the benefit changes were not good policy, but they found a vote against them very difficult to explain to their constituents. In an era when reliance on ad hoc changes was perceived as leading to higher real benefits, indexation seemed to offer a way to make a benefit freeze politically palatable – i.e., it reconciled their ‘good policy’ objectives with blame-avoiding ones.

Sources of Blame-Avoiding Behavior

The claim here is not that all politicians and bureaucrats – or even most of them – are pure blame avoiders all of the time. Politicians in equivalent situations may vary in their aversion to risk, and hence in their willingness to be perceived as imposing or acquiescing in losses rather than minimizing or disguising them. Indeed, politicians may, when placed in difficult blame-avoiding situations, simply refuse to pursue strategies consistent with that situation: John Kennedy’s *Profiles in Courage* is a chronicle of individuals who pursued their own views of good policy when placed in blame-avoiding situations. But for every Edmund G. Ross and Thomas Hart Benton in office who eschews blame-avoiding, there are probably many more J. W. Fulbrights who vote against civil rights legislation and Frank Churches who vote against gun control – if for no other reason than that the latter are likely to stay in office longer.

Socialist parties in many countries face a similar dilemma: should they sacrifice their ideological purity (e.g., by watering down or dropping proposals for nationalization) in order to build political bridges with the middle class? An approach which maximizes political credit with party activists is likely to lead to permanent opposition status or (if the party has won office already) to a loss of power.

The justification given by blame-avoiders is simple: they cannot pursue their other policy objectives if they are not re-elected, and they will not be re-elected if they do not suppress their own views of ‘good policy’ when these views clash with the strongly held opinions of their constituents. Indeed, it might be said that over the long term, *blame avoiding behavior in*

situations that mandate such behavior is a precondition for pursuing other policy motivations in situations that do not compel that behavior. Those who fail to avoid blame are likely to find themselves unemployed. Even if voters' judgments are only partially based on a desire to punish behavior or views of which they disapprove, politicians still have strong incentives to minimize potential blame, because (1) they cannot be certain which issues might be picked up by future opponents and used against them, and (2) only some, not all, voters need to pursue retribution as a voting objective for a politician's office to be in danger (Fenno, 1978: 141–143).

The number of parties or candidates competing for votes (which itself reflects the entry barriers posed by electoral laws) may influence whether a party stresses credit-claiming or blame avoiding in its electoral appeals. In a two-party system like the United States, the best strategy is probably to take ambiguous stands and duck divisive issues (i.e., to minimize blame) to avoid offending marginal voters. In a multi-party system, on the other hand, some parties may be better off by taking pointed, controversial positions (credit-claiming) in order to build a distinctive political base and avoid becoming lost in a crowded field.

Whether credit-claiming, blame avoiding or non-electoral motivations dominate policymakers' decision-making in a particular policy arena will depend in large part on two factors: (1) how constituent costs and benefits are distributed;⁵ and (2) how constituency costs and benefits are translated into political gains and losses.

BLAME-GENERATING SITUATIONS: whereas the absence of concentrated constituency losses may make blame-avoiding motivations irrelevant, at least four situations may lead to blame-avoiding behavior (Table 2). The first is when there is a zero-sum conflict among the policymakers' constituents. Table 2 outlines this situation in its simplest form: a choice between a single alternative policy and the status quo. When concentrated benefits of the alternative policy are high, and costs are low or relatively diffuse, the policymaker can claim credit with constituents for making that choice, as shown in Cell 3.⁶ The distribution of 'pork barrel projects' such as dams and harbor projects, for example, is virtually pure political 'profit', for projects are quite visible and costs are broadly spread. Political analyses that focus on credit claiming have generally examined these 'loss-free' activities, and some analysts have even claimed that policymakers skew their own, and government's activities so as to maximize credit-claiming opportunities (Fiorina, 1977: 46).

Politicians can also claim credit when benefits of the alternative are low and costs are high: for example, if a federal facility in a legislator's district is threatened with closure (Cell 2). In this situation, the decisionmaker receives credit for opposing its adoption. (Even here a credit-claiming

TABLE 2: *Cost-Benefit Distributions and Policymakers' Motivations*

		Perceived net benefits to constituency of policy choice:	
		High	Low
Perceived net costs to constituency of policy choice:	High	(1) Blame Avoiding	(2) Credit-Claiming
	Low	(3) Credit Claiming	(4) Non-electoral motivations (e.g., good policy or vote-trading)

approach is not without risks, however. If leading the opposition to a measure has little prospect of success, and the policymaker feels that he or she is likely to be blamed for failure in spite of having tried, it might be more fruitful to portray him or herself as powerless to influence the decision – i.e., to ‘pass the buck’ on responsibility to others.)

When both costs and benefits are low, the legislator will be relatively unconstrained, and he or she can act according to non-electoral (e.g., ‘good policy’ or vote-trading) motivations (Cell 4).

Clearly a policymaker’s most difficult choice is in Cell 1, where bringing benefits for one part of his or her constituency requires imposing costs on another segment. In this situation the decisionmaker has two options. He or she can attempt to calculate the strength of the impacts and the power of the groups involved, and then back the side that promises the higher political returns, claiming credit for having done so. But this credit-claiming response risks offending the losers, who are more likely to remember that loss and punish him or her for it. So long as the losses (and thus potential blame) are not drastically outweighed by other groups’ gains, we would expect policymakers to focus on gaining credit only after attempting to minimize losses – and therefore blame.

A second situation leading to blame avoidance arises when all possible alternatives have strong negative consequences for at least some of the policymakers’ constituents. This is a negative-sum game. Here there is no credit to be obtained. Policymakers can only hope to limit their exposure to blame. This form of blame avoidance is particularly likely to arise when government is allocating budgetary cutbacks.

A third blame-generating situation occurs when constituency opinion is overwhelmingly on a single side of an issue. When consensus is so

pervasive, there is little credit to be derived from agreement with it – conformity is simply expected. But if a candidate can show that his or her opponent has violated the consensual norm – e.g., is or was a Communist, a drug user or a spouse or child abuser – it can be very damaging indeed. Other forms of personal scandal, such as paternity of an illegitimate child or receipt of bribes, may also lead to an earlier-than-planned exit from the political scene. These can be termed ‘consensus-violating’ situations. A legislator’s attendance at roll call votes is a classic example of this type of blame-generating situation: it provides virtually no credit-claiming opportunities (because voters assume that representatives should be present for all votes), but legislators with poor attendance records have had that fact used against them very effectively in the United States.

A fourth situation in which blame-avoiding behavior is likely to occur is when the personal or policy interests of the policymaker and clientele are opposed. Congressional pay raises are perhaps the classic instance of such a conflict. There could hardly be a clearer opportunity for ‘capture’ of a decision-making process by an organized group. But there is little political credit to be gained for legislators who favor pay increases and much blame. Indeed, without the concept of blame avoidance it would be difficult to understand why legislators do not vote themselves huge salaries – it is certainly in their economic interest to do so. Legislators are very concerned about incurring political blame, however. It is for this reason that legislators sought to keep the pay raise issue off their agenda by providing for an automatic process of increases. When this proved impossible to implement, legislators were once again forced to vote down pay raises.

ATTRIBUTING BLAME: The argument for a negativity bias in voting behavior assumes that at least some voters base their voting decisions largely on retrospective considerations (i.e., on officeholders’ past records) rather than on prospective considerations (expectations of their future performance) or on other factors such as candidate personality or party identification (Fiorina, 1981; Key, 1966). To the extent that voters make choices on grounds other than retrospective ones, politicians have more autonomy – and less need to blame-avoid – in their own choices.

Policymakers may escape blame and obtain autonomy even where there are real or potential constituency losses. Richard Fenno has shown that legislators in the US work to develop enough trust on the part of their constituents that they will have ‘leeway’ to vote their conscience on some issues (Fenno, 1978: chapter 5). Legislators from relatively safe districts – whether as a result of their own leeway-building efforts, absence of party competition, or some other factor – presumably do not need to be as concerned with avoiding blame as those with only a marginal hold on office. Any leeway that is achieved is rarely complete, however. There is

evidence that US senators seeking re-election moderate their voting decisions as an election approaches, presumably because they believe that their constituents are more likely to remember and punish recent 'deviant' votes than older ones. The pattern is just the opposite among legislators not seeking re-election: in this group, Republicans tend to become more conservative and Democrats more liberal between the fifth and sixth years of their terms (Thomas, 1985).

Voters may also err in attributing blame. On the one hand, they may fail to link policymakers to choices they have in fact made or outcomes to which they have contributed. On the other hand, they may attribute a linkage where the policymaker's influence was really weak or non-existent. Perhaps the most durable case of over-attribution was the American electorate's blaming the Hoover administration and the Republican party for the onset of the Great Depression – an image which helped the Democrats for decades.

GENERATING AND AVOIDING BLAME: Policymakers' motivations are not determined entirely by the distribution of costs and benefits among their constituents. They are also determined by the way choices are structured (Riker, 1986). If, for example, alternatives which place policymakers' and constituents' interests in direct conflict can be kept off the agenda, policymakers may be able to reduce blame-avoiding behavior.

On the other hand, the importance of blame-avoiding motivations among policymakers can provide an important boost to those with opposing views. The motives of those opponents may be based on their own notions of good policy or desire to claim credit with their own political constituencies rather than upon blame avoidance. Nor is it necessary that a majority of policymakers (legislators, for example) have strong blame-avoiding motivations for there to be a substantial impact on public policy: it is enough that blame-avoiders hold the balance of power in decision-making. If sponsors of 'hard to vote against' legislation such as Congressional pay freezes and Social Security benefit increases can force the issue onto the agenda and shape it in such a way that it activates blame-generating pressures, they can use others' fears of electoral retribution to force blame-avoiders to support their own proposals.

Thus the shaping of alternatives and agendas is an important determinant of which motivations dominate in specific choice situations. And by shaping motivations, political combatants can also affect policy outcomes. In the battle over the 1981 budget reconciliation bill in the House of Representatives, for example, both sides sought to shape the vote in ways that would limit blame for a vote cast on their side, while maximizing the blame-generating potential of a vote for the opposition. The Democrats sought (and the Rules Committee approved) a rule that

would have forced separate votes on five sections of the bill. The result was, as David Stockman put it, that ‘Republicans – and Boll Weevils – were going to be forced to vote against food stamps and Medicaid and Social Security, out loud and one at a time’ (Stockman, 1986: 218). The administration and House Republicans, on the other hand, sought a single up-or-down vote on the entire package. This proposal would disguise votes to cut individual programs. It thus maximized the prospects of winning blame-motivated support from wavering Democrats who, in Stockman’s words, ‘weren’t even remotely genuine fiscal conservatives . . . [but rather] simply muddle-minded pols who had been scared by the President’s popularity in their home districts’ (Stockman, 1986: 207). A closed rule was adopted in a House floor vote, ensuring passage of the administration-backed package.

Forces Increasing Blame-Avoiding Behavior

Blame-avoiding is by no means a new phenomenon in policymaking. But a number of changes in American society – notably in the economy and fiscal climate, in the way political campaigns are run, and in the way Congress operates – have increased incentives to engage in blame-avoiding behavior.

Fiscal stress has given politics an increasingly zero-sum cast. Programs are forced to compete in the political market-place for funds. Budget deficits have also increased the involvement of budget guardians (notably the Office of Management and Budget and congressional Budget committees) in public policymaking. These developments have undercut the ability of clientele and policy specialists to keep decision-making within a narrow (and favorable) policy subsystem, and have forced politicians to engage in more loss-allocating activities.

Incentives for blame avoidance have also increased in recent years by the decline of party as a determinant of electoral behavior. Incumbent legislators have responded to party decline ‘[b]y developing a reputation with a minimal amount of partisan or ideological content, . . . induc[ing] constituents to evaluate them separately from the state of the nation and the performance of parties and administrations’ (Ferejohn and Fiorina, 1985: 94–95). In this situation, voters are likely to continue returning the incumbent *unless they are given a reason not to*. Legislators know it, and their potential opponents know it. Thus legislators must be concerned primarily with avoiding giving their opponents a popular election issue. But challengers have been given new tools as well. In particular, the ability of television advertising to present quick, simple negative images

in voters' minds can undermine confidence in the incumbent, reinforcing legislators' reluctance to vote against positions likely to appeal to poorly informed constituencies.

Political and policy changes have also stimulated blame-generating behavior within Congress. Legislators are no longer dependent on their party's apparatus to win the party nomination, nor on party funds or party image to win the general election. As a result of the decline of norms of apprenticeship and the growth of formula funding for federal grant programs, junior members are no longer dependent on the largesse of more senior members to win benefits for their districts. In this environment, members are less likely to forgo credit-claiming opportunities that require them to force blame-generating choices on their colleagues. If their colleagues do not like to take an open stand on such classic blame-generating issues as congressional pay raises, federal funding of abortions and a balanced budget amendment to the constitution, that is just too bad.

Interest groups are also getting more sophisticated at generating blame. The Americans for Tax Reform coalition, for example, has attempted to persuade all House and Senate candidates to pledge that they will not raise taxes above levels in the 1986 tax bill. The idea is to raise the salience of the issue and to force legislators to make binding commitments which they otherwise would not make – and will not be able to break without incurring charges of bad faith. Other groups have published 'Dirty Dozen' lists (i.e., lists of the dozen legislators with the worst voting records on a particular issue, such as environmental protection) as a means of focusing blame on legislators whom they hope to defeat or whose behavior they hope to modify.

At the same time, a series of Congressional reforms have undercut the ability of legislative specialists to control the legislative agenda. Rules changes enacted in 1970 made it easier for House members to gain floor consideration of amendments. Thus issues like indexation, which might not have reached the floor in prior years because they did not fit the 'credit-claiming' interests of the specialists, are reaching the floor. And once non-specialist legislators are forced to take a position on indexation, they find it very difficult to vote no, even if they might prefer to do so. The institution of recorded teller votes in the House of Representatives in 1970 (followed by electronic voting in 1973) dramatically increased the number of issues on which Representatives were forced to take recorded positions, further intensifying the pressures for 'blame avoiding' behavior (Oleszek, 1984: 140–142). And because legislators often know little about the precise amendment they are voting on, and cannot predict which issues may be raised and cast in a blame-generating light by a challenger in a future election, they search for politically safe solutions.

Policymakers have not been indifferent to these increasing blame-avoiding forces, however. In the past few Congresses, the House of Representatives has made increasing use of restrictive rules that limit the introduction of ‘hard to vote against’ amendments.

The House has also responded to another consequence of increased roll-call voting – namely, increased pressures to be present for many votes – in a blame-avoiding fashion. The House leadership responded to the universal collective blame-avoiding interest of its peers by scheduling most roll-call votes on Tuesdays through Thursdays, lessening pressures to be in Washington and freeing members’ schedules both for committee work and time in their home districts.

Blame-Avoiding Strategies

Policymakers can respond to potential blame-generating pressures in several ways. They can, first of all, attempt to prevent a blame-generating situation from arising in the first place. If that fails, they can attempt to deflect blame to others or at least diffuse it broadly. At least eight specific strategies can be identified as flowing from these blame-avoiding motives.⁷ (Table 3)

1. *Limit the Agenda*: The best way for policymakers to keep a blame-generating issue from hurting them politically is to keep it off the agenda in the first place. The successful Republican effort to prevent separate votes on a series of specific program cuts in the 1981 budget reconciliation bill is a good example.

If legislators engage in blame-avoiding behavior only because they have to, why don’t they simply band together to make it unnecessary by keeping all blame-generating choices off the agenda? In many cases they do. American political institutions have been shaped to a very substantial degree by policymakers’ attempts to limit their need to blame-avoid. The long-time closed rule in the House of Representatives for Ways and Means Committee legislation restrained the enthusiasm of non-Committee members for proposing budget-busting tax breaks for specific constituencies. Equally important from the Committee’s perspective, this agenda limitation allowed Ways and Means members to perform their role of budget guardian for the institution without having to oppose those amendments on the floor – i.e., it prevented a blame-avoiding situation from arising.

Legislators cannot always cooperate to make blame-avoiding behavior unnecessary, however. There are several reasons why. The most important is that some issues pit the blame-avoiding interests of one group of legislators against the credit-claiming and policy interests of others. If

TABLE 3: *Eight Blame-Avoiding Strategies*

Strategy:	Approach to Avoiding Blame:	Blame-generating situations where most likely to occur:
1. Agenda limitation	Prevent blame-generating by keeping potentially costly choices from being considered	Policymaker-constituency conflict
2. Redefine the Issue	Prevent blame-generating by developing new policy options which diffuse or obfuscate losses	Any
3. Throw Good Money After Bad	Prevent or delay blame generating by providing resources to prevent constituencies from suffering losses	Zero-sum or negative-sum game
4. Pass the Buck	Deflect blame by forcing others to make politically costly choices	Zero- or negative-sum game
5. Find a Scapegoat	Deflect blame by blaming others	Zero- or negative-sum game
6. Jump on the Bandwagon	Deflect blame by supporting politically popular alternative	Policymaker-constituency conflict
7. Circle the Wagons	Diffuse blame by spreading it among as many policymakers as possible	Negative-sum game
8. 'Stop Me Before I Kill Again'	Prevent blame-generation by keeping credit-claiming opportunities that conflict with policy preferences from being considered	Policymaker-constituency conflict

some legislators would prefer not to vote on Congressional pay or on granting a Social Security COLA increase, others see this as an opportunity to lead the fight for those issues. The latter group will seek to force these issues onto the agenda, and the institutional changes that have occurred in Congress since 1970 have reinforced their ability to do so. Thus credit-claiming and blame-avoiding behavior may occur together, but in oppos-

ing groups: credit-claiming activity forces proposals onto the agenda, and blame-avoiding reactions lead to their adoption.

Even if blame-generating decisions cannot be kept off the agenda completely, policymakers can often at least influence when they must confront them. Thus controversial issues may, for example, be delegated to study commissions with instructions to report just after the election. The issue may thus be removed from the agenda until that time.

Once an issue has made it on to the agenda, blame avoidance suggests several alternative strategies:

2. *Redefine the Issue*: If policymakers cannot keep a blame-generating issue off the agenda, they may be able to reshape it in such a way as to prevent blame. If an issue divides two industries for example, policies may be devised so that each industry obtains satisfactory outcomes, while costs are spread more broadly.

Blame avoidance is oftentimes not an all or nothing matter, moreover. In Congressional roll calls, legislators are of course forced to make simple yes or no decisions. But even in this arena, legislators often provide themselves with a series of votes to soften (or obfuscate) their position on controversial issues.

3. *Throw Good Money After Bad*: Sometimes policymakers know that they will be forced to acquiesce in blame-generating losses eventually. This is most likely to occur in negative-sum games (when all possible outcomes involve losses) or when policies have clearly failed. In these cases, decisionmakers cannot keep the issue off the agenda and they may not be able to diffuse the losses enough that their political impact is small. But they may be able to delay those outcomes by committing extra resources to shore up the status quo. In Indochina, for example, US policymakers were guided in large part by the rule, 'Do not lose the rest of Vietnam to Communist control before the next election' (Ellsberg, 1971: 252). Despite pessimism that the war could be won, policymakers did not wish to be branded as having 'lost' a country. On a very different political issue, disposal of wastes from nuclear power plants, a similar pattern can be seen. Wastes continue to be stored at power plant sites because of prolonged wrangling over a permanent disposal site. A first site for a repository is unlikely to be named until 1990 or open before 1998 – 16 years after passage of the act that set up a selection process.

4. *Pass the Buck*: If a blame-generating decision has to be made, policymakers are likely to try to delegate that decision to someone else (Fiorina, 1982). Congress repeatedly passes protectionist trade legislation, relying on the President to veto that legislation and incur the wrath of affected industries. Decisions on siting of nuclear waste repository facilities are another eminently unpleasant activity that Congress has dumped in the President's lap. Independent regulatory commissions are

delegated responsibility for many of the most sensitive economic conflicts that pit one firm or industry's interests directly against others (e.g., mergers, rate-making).

Automatic government is a more recent, and increasingly important, manifestation of policymakers' desire to pass the buck to avoid blame. The Gramm-Rudman budget-cutting mechanism is a perfect illustration. Congress sets in motion a process which months or years later causes cuts to be made automatically, with no one directly to blame. Even the officials who would be responsible for sequestering funds are simply following a mandated formula, so they cannot be blamed.

Understanding why politicians would give up discretion over unpopular, cost-generating decisions is relatively easy. But why have they also given up authority over decisions in sectors where there are few or no concentrated losses – for example, over benefit levels in income transfer programs and potential pork barrel decisions in such areas as federal grants?

Understanding that politicians are blame-avoiding and risk averse can help to explain this apparent anomaly. This is clearest for legislators. Congressional incumbents have a number of tools at their disposal – constituency casework, mail to their constituents, etc. – that provide credit claiming opportunities. Thus the primary concern for the bulk of incumbents must be not to give an attractive issue to a challenger. Given this situation, their incentive is to neutralize – i.e., make unlikely to generate blame even if it sacrifices credit-claiming opportunities as well – any issue which has a significant prospect for generating blame. In choosing whether to maintain discretion over any program or give it up, legislators must take into account the prospect that they might in fact lose benefits for their constituents in future rounds, and that a future election opponent could use this as an election issue against him or her. (Indeed, it is not even necessary that actual losses occur – only that the opponent claim that they could do better.) Moreover, resources spent influencing these allocation decisions must be taken from a limited supply, and those resources can be better spent in decisions with less blame-generating potential. Forgoing discretion is, in short, likely to be a politically safer response except where the possibility that one's constituency will suffer real losses is remote.⁸

5. *Find a Scapegoat*: If a politician can't pass the buck for an unpopular decision, he or she may be able to pass the blame for it instead. The usual tactic is to claim that your actions were made necessary by the actions of your predecessors: President Reagan, for example, has claimed that austerity measures were required because of profligate spending by past Democratic administrations and Congresses. Prime Minister Thatcher has made similar claims in Great Britain.

Scapegoating can also be useful when past scandals or policy gaffes are discovered. President Reagan has been able to use his decentralized management style to deflect blame to subordinates on many occasions, giving rise to the term 'Teflon presidency' (nothing sticks to the President). The limits to this strategy appear to have been surpassed only in the Iran/Contra arms imbroglio, where there is a broad popular perception that the President either knew more than he was saying or should have exercised more control over his subordinates.

6. *Jump on the Bandwagon*: On issues which pit a policymaker's views versus those of his or her constituents, he or she may be able to switch sides unobtrusively – to jump on the bandwagon – when it becomes evident that other strategies (notably agenda limitation and redefining the issue) have failed to keep a blame-generating situation from arising. If the policymaker's original position has not been made publicly, he or she may even be able to claim credit for holding the popular position all along. This desire to turn blame into credit is the source of the curious Congressional phenomenon of seemingly unimportant procedural votes that are in fact more important than final votes on passage. The unobtrusive procedural vote, which may be closely fought, reveals the balance of forces between the two contending sides. Once it is clear which side is likely to win, legislators may feel that their vote in favor of an unpopular side no longer serves any useful purpose. They can thus switch their vote to support the more popular side on final passage.

A clear example of failed agenda limitation followed by a bandwagon effect can be seen in the 1986 House debate on an omnibus drug bill. With an election less than eight weeks away, members were extremely reluctant to appear 'soft on drugs'. Liberal Democrats criticized their own leadership for failing to preclude floor consideration of Republican amendments that would require military participation in anti-drug efforts, limit the application of the 'exclusionary rule' on illegally seized evidence, and permit imposition of the death penalty in some drug cases (Rovner, 1986). Forced to take a stand on these issues (in a House atmosphere that two of them described as 'a mob mentality' and 'panic and hysteria'), many liberal Democrats defected to support them (Feuerbringer, 1986). On final passage they defected overwhelmingly, despite inclusion of all the Republican amendments. The bill passed by a vote of 392–16. The possibility of a Senate filibuster was then dismissed by House Majority Leader Jim Wright, who argued, 'Anyone responsible for preventing this legislation from being enacted will have an angry American public to answer to' (Rovner, 1986: 2126).

7. *Circle the Wagons*: This strategy is based on the same principle – safety in numbers – as the 'jump on the bandwagon' approach. It is most likely to be found in negative-sum situations, where there are only losses to be

allocated and no way of evading the unpleasant choices. If the 'pass the buck' and 'throw good money after bad' options are no longer viable, decisionmakers may find themselves in a situation where they have a common interest in diffusing the inevitable blame by arriving at a consensus solution. Thus no one has to stick their neck out: everyone provides political cover for everyone else, making it difficult for a future political opponent to raise the issue. When it works best, this approach may even yield political dividends – for taking the hard, gutsy stand (which everyone else is taking as well).

'Circling the wagons' is invariably a risky strategy, however. It will work only if near-unanimity can be maintained. If some participants in the process see an opportunity to deflect the blame to others and claim credit for resisting the loss-producing solution, they will be sorely tempted to defect from the consensus. Thus all participants will be afraid to publicly take the lead in proposing solutions; unless agreements can be negotiated quietly, with commitments of support made in advance, they are unlikely to succeed.

8. *'Stop Me Before I Kill Again'*: Policymakers are not, as has been noted, single-minded seekers of re-election – they are also likely to have preferences for 'good policy'. Sometimes politicians are faced with a choice between a politically popular position – a credit-claiming opportunity – and what they believe to be a responsible policy position. If they vote against that choice, on the other hand, they may incur a lot of blame. If policymakers are simply credit-claimers, they will sacrifice their policy preferences, 'jump on the bandwagon', and support the politically popular position. Thus the analogy to the murderer who asks that he be stopped before he kills again: the policymakers know that what they are doing is wrong, but they can't help themselves. This was the situation that fiscally conservative Republicans in Congress found themselves in as they resisted politically popular Social Security benefit increases in the early 1970s. But as they discovered, jumping on the bandwagon is not the only response: if they limited their discretion over the choice, they could avoid blame and obtain their policy preferences at the same time (Derthick, 1979: 349–350). A similar logic is used by many proponents of constitutional limits on government expenditures: i.e., it is the only way to force legislators to collectively exercise spending restraint, since none of them wishes to vote against individual spending programs (Wildavsky, 1980).

The strategy policymakers choose depends in large part on the nature of the blame-generating situation – e.g., whether it pits constituency versus constituency or policymaker versus constituency (Table 3). A 'jump on the bandwagon' strategy may be an effective response to policymaker-constituency conflict. It might not be a viable option in a zero-sum conflict between constituents, however, for no single option may

placate all sides. Passing the buck, scapegoating, redefining the issue or throwing good money after bad are all more likely to be more successful in this type of situation. Choice among these options will depend upon the costs and likelihood of success of each option (e.g., if there is a credible scapegoat or entity to which the buck can be passed).

Blame Avoiding in Comparative Perspective

The discussion of blame avoidance has to this point focused on examples drawn from the United States. But the political importance of generating and avoiding blame is by no means a uniquely American phenomenon. It has its roots in a specific set of structural conditions, viz. (1) loss-allocating activity by government, and (2) the ability of citizens and/or politicians to hold government officials accountable, be it through elections, votes of confidence in Parliament, demonstrations, or coups d'état.

The more governments attempt to do, the more likely they are to be held liable for poor performance, or for policy changes that impose losses, in those sectors. Governments that regulate or subsidize the retail price of basic foodstuffs, for example, are likely to face strong pressures not to raise prices. When they finally do so as a result of rising budget deficits or pressure from the International Monetary Fund, they may face huge protests. Governments that have accepted a responsibility for maintaining full employment, Sweden, for example, make even conservative parties reluctant to allow unemployment to rise when they come to power (Jonung, 1985; Weaver, 1987), whereas in the United States the federal government is partially shielded from attack by public beliefs that it is unemployed individuals rather than government who are to blame for their unemployment (Lau and Sears, 1981; but see also Weatherford 1978; Weatherford, 1983).

The type of resources available to potential 'blame generators' and to those who seek to avoid blame will affect both how much blame-avoiding those in power have to do and the strategies with which they choose to do it. If governmental power is highly concentrated, as in Eastern Europe, a pass the buck strategy of avoiding blame may work for individual functionaries and ministries, but it will not work for government (and party) as a whole. Authoritarian governments can suppress blame, but they cannot avoid it. Authoritarian governments occasionally fall, or at least change their leadership, in response to political pressure. Gomulka was deposed in Poland to placate public protest over food price increases; Krushchev fell in the Soviet Union in part due to elite dissatisfaction with his 'hare-brained schemes' in agriculture. In short, where centralization of power makes buck-passing less credible as a strategy to avoid blame, scapegoating is likely to be an important blame-avoiding strategy.

Parliamentary institutions also have distinctive impacts on how blame is generated and avoided. Indeed Great Britain, without a written constitution to constrain government, relies ultimately on politicians' fears of attracting blame as a constraint. A full treatment of this topic is not possible here, but a few points can be made. Blame avoiding in the United States is highly decentralized and individualistic, reflecting the great leeway given to individual political entrepreneurs in a system of governmental checks and balances, weak and incoherent parties, and decentralized campaign financing. Both blame-generating and blame-avoiding in parliamentary systems tend to be much more party- and government-centered, reflecting strong party images and party discipline in the legislature. These strong party images make blame-generating much easier. Rose (1984: 49) indicates that party leaders in British election campaigns generally spend more time attacking the other party(ies) than in defending their own party's position and record.

Party discipline seriously constrains the blame-avoiding options for legislators. This is especially true in party list systems, where control over placement on the list gives party leaders a strong mechanism to punish disloyal behavior. Even in a single-member constituency system, the fact that the careers of Members of Parliament are highly dependent on advancing within their party caucus means they cannot do as their American counterparts might: disavow, vote against, and even lead the legislative fight against policies proposed by their party's leaders in the executive.⁹ Voters' recognition that their legislator must adhere to party discipline partially shields an MP from *personal* blame for his or her votes, but it cannot absolve completely. MPs can also attempt to insulate themselves from their party's unpopular policies by that quintessential credit-claiming activity, constituency work (Cain, 1983). But this is a substitute for, rather than a form of, individual blame-avoiding.

So long as there is a majority government, opposition parties in parliamentary systems can do little other than generate blame, for they cannot hope to have an effective voice in formulating policy. In countries with Question Time or its equivalent, this blame-generating process has become highly institutionalized. The opposition seeks to embarrass the government, and the government seeks to dodge the questions, obfuscate or counterattack.

Although the opposition can embarrass the government and attempt to force it to consider issues of the opposition's choosing, the government can virtually monopolize the actual legislative agenda. It can refuse to bring up legislation when it does not wish to, and attempt to bury controversial issues by consigning them to commissions or parliamentary committees. Government can also largely control how those issues will be defined in the legislative process. The ability to control agendas also imposes

burdens on parties in parliamentary systems. Because governing parties are supposed to govern, evidence of disunity, such as an open backbench rebellion, may have adverse electoral consequences (Jackson, 1968: 300–301). Thus potential rebels may be able to use the blame-avoiding instincts of their Whips to win a favorable behind-the-scenes accommodation of their views.

Parliamentary government also makes it particularly difficult for these governments to dodge blame for losses they have imposed or acquiesced in, because it concentrates authority and accountability in the government-of-the-day and provides regular opportunities to hold government accountable (Weaver, 1985). There is no one to whom the buck can be passed and, in most cases, it is transparently obvious that government could have intervened to prevent the loss, especially for micro-level changes such as a coal mine closure in Wales or a rail line abandonment in Western Canada. Governments in parliamentary systems are thus likely to face very strong pressures to ‘throw good money after bad’ to prop up failed policies. Officials in the executive cannot use the legislature as a scapegoat (and vice versa) in the United States. In theory, ministers who are responsible for failed policies can resign as scapegoats, but this usually occurs only in the case of scandal rather than failed policies. The principle of collective cabinet responsibility assures that the government as a whole will share in any blame for failed policies. Governments may, however, have somewhat more freedom in distancing themselves from blame for macro-economic conditions than for micro-level ones: the Thatcher government, for example, was able to win re-election in 1983 in part because ‘whilst high unemployment has consistently been seen as the most important issue facing the country, expectations as to its solution are low, and the government has been decreasingly singled out as the sole cause of the problem’ (Richardson and Moon, 1984: 30).

There are also differences among governments in parliamentary systems, especially between majority governments and minority or coalition governments. There is some evidence that weak coalition governments escape blame for poor economic performance when stronger, single-party, majority governments could not (Paldam and Schneider, 1980; Lybeck, 1985). On the other hand, these governments may be subject to collapse at any time because one or more parties does not wish to be associated with an unpopular policy choice. Hence, policy decisions are especially likely to have a blame-avoiding cast in coalitions. Moreover, because coalition partners are likely to be competing for the same voters in the next election, they may try to generate blame against their partners while trying to build a blame-minimizing record themselves. Indeed, parties’ reasons for staying in government may well be

based on blame avoidance: a fear that they will be punished by voters for causing the collapse of the government.

Blame Avoidance and Policy Outputs

The analysis outlined above suggests that blame avoidance may lead policy alternatives to be chosen that might otherwise fail. In this sense alone, it has an important impact on policy outputs, if only the passive one of influencing choices made from among a set of alternatives determined by 'good policy' advocates and credit-claimers. But blame-avoiding also affects the alternatives considered.

The limitation of policymakers' discretion through indexation, formula grants, merit hiring and promotion and other more or less automatic mechanisms is the foremost example. Blame avoidance can help to produce discretion-reducing decisions in three ways. First, policymakers may themselves seek the reduction of discretion because they believe that it offers few credit-claiming opportunities and high prospects for blame. Louis XIV's rueful comment about malcontents and ingrates reflects this concern. Gramm-Rudman is a more recent manifestation of this phenomenon: discretion to cut popular spending programs is not the kind of discretion that politically astute decisionmakers wish to exercise. Reduction of discretion is, in short, a way of 'passing the buck'.

Second, policymakers may wish to maintain discretion to take advantage of credit-claiming opportunities, but be forced to reject it when their opponents mobilize opposition to continued discretion. The elimination of patronage when it became an issue of 'good government' is an example. Here reduction of discretion follows from a 'jump on the bandwagon' mentality.

Finally, policymakers may come to favor a reduction of discretion because they believe that exercising discretion forces them to make unacceptable choices between obtaining substantial credit but very bad policy, on the one hand, or incurring substantial political blame, on the other. The support of conservative Republicans for Social Security indexation as a way to avoid having to vote either for or against real benefit increases was noted earlier as an example of this 'stop me before I kill again' motive for reducing discretion.

Several other consequences of blame avoidance are also important. Blame avoidance can, for example, help to explain why policymakers often urge competing interest groups to work out differences among themselves and arrive at a consensus position which is then endorsed by those officials. Doing so limits the ability of decision-makers to claim credit for reaching an agreement. More importantly, it allows them to

avoid taking positions and making decisions that will offend one or more of the groups.

Understanding blame avoidance also can help us understand the limits on interest group capture of governmental institutions. Even if a specialist clientele is normally the only 'attentive public' for an agency or Congressional committee, those bodies know that they cannot go too far in pursuing that clientele's interest without attracting unwanted outside attention. Regulatory agencies can have their decisions overturned by the courts, Congressional committees by their full bodies. There is also the potential embarrassment of being shown to be too solicitous of a clientele.

This is not to say that catering to specialized interests does not occur. It does. Indeed, it is inevitable – even endemic – in a system such as the US one, which allows agencies and committees substantial autonomy within a system of multiple, intermittently exercised checks. But the 'capture' process is one that has natural limits based on blame avoiding – namely, the agency or committee's fear of mobilizing latent constituencies or governmental checks – i.e., of attracting blame.¹⁰

Blame avoidance also helps to explain why policies are so difficult to change, even if they fail. If policymakers and their constituents perceived costs and benefits symmetrically, they would be willing to change policies quite freely, at least as long as the new policies promised at least as high a surplus of concentrated benefits over costs as the status quo. But substantial vested interests often develop around programs. Because costs and benefits are perceived asymmetrically, policymakers fear that new policies will not win them as much support as dismantling the old ones will lose. They are thus afraid to dismantle policies, and when they do, they may 'grandfather' in current beneficiaries so that they do not become losers (Leman, 1980).

Perhaps more important than its potential impact on any specific set of policy outputs, however, are the implications of blame avoidance for the theory and practice of democracy. More specifically, it has implications for at least two constraints that proponents of economic analysis of politics have outlined to an efficient transmission of citizen preferences into government action. The first is that information is costly to obtain (Downs, 1956: chapters 11–13). As a result, most citizens do not in fact have a very good idea of what candidates' and officeholders' positions and records are. Second, because of 'free rider' problems, not all interests are likely to be equally well represented – and thus equally influential in decisions (Olson, 1965). On each of these points, the blame-avoiding perspective suggests both some good news and some bad news.

On the question of information costs, the good news is that political entrepreneurs (both interest groups and candidates) have strong incentives to purvey information about their opponents in a way that imposes

as few costs as possible on voters, believing that this information-giving function will provide a substantial return on their investment. On the other hand, this information will be very biased toward the negative, and may contain substantial distortions. In addition, fear of blame causes politicians to be vague in their issue positions, especially where constituencies are divided. Thus voters are denied full information on which to make their choices (Page and Brody, 1972: 995).

On the question of free rider constraints to formation of groups, the good news suggested by the blame-avoiding perspective is that individuals facing major losses probably don't have to be well organized to have attention paid to them. Officeholders are likely to anticipate constituency losses and work to avoid them, since they recognize their dire consequences. On the other hand, the theory of blame avoidance suggests that some groups' views – those that are threatened with losses – will be weighted more than the views of others, because potential losers are more likely to be vocal in expressing their views. It suggests that a Paretian view of the proper role of government (that it should maximize public welfare only when doing so does not make some individuals worse off) may have some empirical grounding, irrespective of its ethical validity. For government will be fearful of trying to maximize net social welfare when doing so forces losses on some interests.

NOTES

1. David Mayhew (1974: 52–61) argues that credit-claiming is not a strategy that legislators can engage in on all issues: the claim must be credible. This is possible only if (1) legislators can show that they were 'prime movers' in the adoption of a measure – e.g., a sponsor or member of the legislative committee with jurisdiction over the issue, or (2) the benefits are particularistic, handed out in an ad hoc fashion, with the legislator playing a role in their distribution. He contrasts this with 'position-taking' – issuing a public judgement on an issue, most notably through roll-call votes. The term 'credit-claiming' is used here in a broader sense than in Mayhew's book, to include position-taking when it is done in the expectation of political gain rather than to avoid political losses.
2. Constituency costs and benefits are rarely weighed equally by politicians for a third reason, even if they are equally concentrated. If either costs or benefits fall disproportionately on a group that is unlikely to vote for the officeholder in any case, they will be discounted heavily; the same is true for groups that are unlikely to be shaken from support for the officeholder.
3. For a discussion of why voters are likely to give a higher weight to negative than to positive information, see Lau (1985) and Fiorina and Shepsle (1986).
4. Using both aggregate and individual level data, Hibbing and Alford found that the effects of retrospective economic voting in House elections are limited to races in which an incumbent of the President's party is running. Tufte (1978: 126) has disputed the absence of positive electoral effects of an economic upturn, at least for years of very good economic performance. Tufte also notes that party identification affects how individuals perceive changes in their family's financial situation (p. 130).
5. Constituents will be used here in a broader sense than simply voters in a legislator's district. It includes potential campaign contributors and elites in interest groups with links to the legislator's electoral constituents as well.
6. This choice, as well as a vote for the status quo in Cell 2, can also be seen as extreme cases of a blame-avoiding situation: the costs of a contrary vote are so overwhelmingly negative that this

- option is not even considered. But the more parsimonious explanation is obviously to focus directly on credit-claiming.
7. This list is not intended to be exhaustive. It is limited, for example, to strategies that are likely to affect future policy choices. It thus excludes strategies that are limited to deflecting blame for past policy choices, but are unlikely to affect future ones.
 8. For a similar analysis that stresses universalism in legislative decisionmaking as a form of insurance for a steady stream of benefits, see Shepsle and Weingast (1981). Their analysis, however, focuses only on the provision of benefits and does not directly address the question of their political implications, notably the casting of blame by future political opponents if those benefits are lost.
 9. Jackson (1968) found that British MPs were seldom successfully punished for rebelling against the Whip, but that they were less likely to receive rewards such as foreign trips, advancement to ministerial posts, peerages, etc.
 10. The economic analogy is to entry into potentially competitive markets with substantial but not insurmountable entry barriers. A firm operating in those markets can gain some monopoly profits, but attempts to exploit them too far will lead to a challenge to their position. Just how large those profits will be depends on the nature of entry barriers. Similarly, the ability of a clientele and its governmental allies to exploit a policy-making monopoly depends on how easily latent checks and counter-clienteles can be mobilized, which in turn depends on barriers to information and organization by those groups.

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