9 *Blame Games and Their Implications for Politics and Democracy under Pressure*

Blame games are distinct political events that protrude from routine political processes. This book develops a theoretical framework for explaining blame game interactions and their consequences. By applying the framework to fifteen blame games, situated in various political systems and issue contexts, it creates a comprehensive understanding of these distinct political events. As microcosms of conflictual politics, the careful study of blame games offers crucial insights into how democratic political systems change and function when they switch into 'conflict mode'. The present chapter begins by summarizing the results derived from the empirical analysis. It then assesses the explanatory potential of the framework, its applicability across space and time, and considers avenues for future research on blame games. Finally, the chapter will draw out a number of insights from the study of blame games that help to improve our understanding of politics and democracy under pressure.

9.1 What This Book Has to Say about Blame Games

Blame games are context-sensitive 'embedded' political events. Understanding them requires the consideration of the institutions that preset the space in which political conflict management occurs, the issue characteristics of the policy controversies at the root of blame games, and interrelations between these groups of factors. In the following, I will briefly summarize the most important results of the empirical analysis.

The Imprint of Institutions

The empirical analysis shows how institutional factors – ranging from hard-wired formal institutions to conventions and policy characteristics – emit incentives and constraints on blame game actors. The structures

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108860116.009 Published online by Cambridge University Press

around routine political interactions, institutionalized accountability structures, and institutional policy characteristics combine in peculiar ways in a political system to influence the behavior of opponents and incumbents. These institutional factors explain the basic setup of a blame game, that is, how political actors position themselves toward a controversy. Moreover, they provide blame gateways to opponents and blame barriers to incumbents. Blame gateways determine whom opponents can hold responsible and credibly attack. Blame barriers, by reducing or deflecting the blame coming from opponents, create space for incumbents to maneuver and thus determine how actively they must engage in blame management. Together, institutional factors influence the power distribution between opponents and incumbents and determine the goals these actors can reasonably pursue during a blame game.

Institutional factors in the UK political system render it difficult for opponents to reach their reputational and policy goals. Ministers, who are usually only briefly in office and are not personally responsible for a controversy, constitute very strong blame shields for the government of the day since, in the absence of personal wrongdoings, they cannot be brought to resign. The 'administration bias', injected by forms of agencification and reinforced by the work of parliamentary committees, ensures that the ministerial blame shield is often not even checked for its resilience during a blame game because media attention and opponent attacks overwhelmingly focus on administrative actors and entities. Incumbents can thus remain rather passive during a blame game, tolerate occasional criticism from the governing majority, and develop strong incentives to leave a policy controversy unaddressed. Overall, institutional factors in the UK political system clearly benefit incumbents during blame games.

Institutional factors in the German political system are conducive to creating a rather aggressive blame game that centers on political incumbents. Extensive conventions of resignation and opportunities to retrieve salient information about a controversy by appointing an inquiry commission are powerful tools for opponents to hold political incumbents accountable and to force them into heated blame game interactions. Consequently, blamed incumbents must actively engage in blame management and may be forced to act in the interest of opponents. However, political incumbents also benefit from institutional factors. An active and loyal governing majority and fragmentation among opponents are assets. Whether the overall institutional

configuration is more favorable to opponents or to incumbents largely depends on the degree of government involvement in a policy controversy. When government involvement is high, incumbents are likely to be at a disadvantage because they cannot keep out of heated blame game interactions with opponents. Conversely, when government involvement in a controversy is low, institutional factors combine to generate a relatively comfortable environment for incumbents.

The Swiss political system features blame games that are characterized by rather unaggressive interparty conflict that spares the politically responsible executive from a large share of the blame. This conflict form is significantly different from the government opposition conflict that characterizes parliamentary systems. Because opponents cannot usually bring incumbents to resign, they concentrate on achieving their policy goals and, for this purpose, attempt to forge 'pressure majorities' in parliament. A pressure majority consists of several parties that acknowledge the need for policy change in response to a controversy. Successfully forging a pressure majority greatly increases the likelihood that the collective executive government will act in the interest of opponents. Due to its collective and nonpartisan nature, the Swiss government is eager to signal its cooperation with as many parties as possible, thus making it very sensitive to the parliamentary majority's stance during a blame game. Interparty conflict creates a comfortable situation for political incumbents. They do not have to engage in intensive blame management and can assume a rather neutral role during a blame game, even in cases where the fault for a controversy clearly lay with the executive.

Overall, these findings shed light on an aspect of institutions that E. E. Schattschneider (1975) and Albert Hirschman (1994) emphasized long ago. Institutions determine the routinized ways in which democratic political systems manage, or 'digest', their policy conflicts. Examining how institutional factors influence blame game interactions amounts to exposing the institutionalized forms of conflict management that democratic political systems have developed to deal with policy controversies.

Blame Games in Front of an Audience

While institutional factors determine the broad contours of blame game interactions in a political system, each system leaves room for blame game actors to address controversy types in specific ways. The

empirical analysis demonstrates how issue characteristics influence the content of blame game interactions. The salience of a controversy and its proximity to the wider public influence whether and how opponents can signal the severity of that controversy to the public and how they can put incumbents under pressure in order to meet their policy demands. Salience and proximity also influence how incumbents position themselves in the face of a controversy and largely account for the concrete strategy mix they employ to manage blame.

Opponents who generate blame for a distant-salient controversy use emotions to attract the public's attention and argue that political incumbents have a moral obligation to address the controversy. Accordingly, they often dismiss incumbents' responses to the controversy as morally inadequate. For incumbents, a distant-salient controversy is a prickly affair. They have to quickly position themselves toward a distant-salient controversy, assume a humble attitude that matches the dominant feeling in society, and adopt various ad hoc measures to demonstrate activism. While incumbents are afraid of reframing the controversy, they intensively engage in blame deflection.

Opponents that blame incumbents for a proximate-nonsalient controversy mainly rely on claims of personal relevance in order to attract the attention of the public and argue that incumbents have a 'debt obligation' to address the controversy. Incumbents who 'betrayed' the public are called on to pay back what they owe by meeting opponents' policy demands. Incumbents, in turn, have to admit the existence of a significant problem and express their willingness to address it. However, in doing so, they can afford to exhibit a confident stance. They defend their actions and strongly engage in reframing activities.

Opponents who blame incumbents for a distant-nonsalient controversy do not usually invest much in blame generation in the absence of factors that promise to damage incumbents' reputation, such as an incumbent's unusual personal involvement in a policy controversy. Distant-nonsalient controversies do not lend themselves to the leveraging of emotions or of personal relevance. Opponents therefore only accuse incumbents of doing a 'bad job' in some way. Incumbents, in turn, can address a distant-nonsalient controversy in a very confident way. They intensively reframe opponents' attacks, often even contesting the existence of a problem, and do not usually issue substantive responses.

Overall, the case studies reveal that opponents and incumbents adopt specific behavioral patterns vis à vis different types of policy

controversies. Opponents and incumbents are aware that they interact in front of an audience that is varyingly predisposed to pay attention to their interactions, and they actively work with issue characteristics to reach their goals. A thorough understanding of blame game interactions requires the consideration of the relationship between the audience and the actors playing the blame game.

A Comprehensive View of Blame Games: How Democratic Political Systems Manage Their Policy Controversies

The last part of the empirical analysis looks at how institutional factors and issue characteristics interact to produce reputational and/or policy consequences. Based on a typological theory of blame games and their consequences, I show that political systems do not just 'pass through' policy controversies (and the public feedback attached to them). Instead, system-specific blame game interactions give them a decisive twist. Depending on the configuration of institutional factors, blame game interactions stall public feedback, amplify it, or process it in a relatively unchanged manner. The UK political system even stalls strong public feedback because blame barriers significantly reduce incumbents' incentives to quickly and boldly address a policy controversy. Blame game interactions in the German political system can amplify even weak public feedback because institutional factors allow opponents to easily put incumbent politicians under pressure. This dynamic creates a strong executive focus during the blame game that forces incumbents to address a policy controversy. In the Swiss political system, the strength of public feedback and the extent of blame game consequences are comparatively the most in line because institutional factors prompt opponents to focus on creating a 'pressure majority', that is, a parliamentary majority that favors policy change, whose successful creation depends heavily on the strength of public feedback.

The Explanatory Potential of the Framework

The empirical analysis presented in this book shows that blame game interactions are highly responsive to the institutional terrain in which they take place and to the audience in front of which they occur. Due to the infinitely complex nature of political events like blame games, there can always be blame game interactions that diverge from these

patterns and similarities in one way or another. Nevertheless, the framework developed in this book, together with the compound research design, allows me to derive robust and generalizable blame game styles. As the fifteen blame games demonstrate, these blame game styles apply to a wide variety of policy controversies that democratic political systems frequently confront. The political management of failed infrastructure projects, procurement or food scandals, security issues, or flawed policy reforms proceed in ways that are largely explicable by reference to institutional factors and issue characteristics. Given the many controversies that each political system (and the actors operating in it) must process year in and year out, one cannot expect that every controversy is uniquely confronted. And yet, it is pretty surprising that a handful of institutional factors and issue characteristics can account for the large contours of a wide variety of policy controversy-induced blame games and their consequences. The analysis shows that other controversy aspects that one could consider decisive, such as whether a blame game cross-cuts or aligns with electoral cleavages or whether or not it involves a vocal opponent at the local level, are of secondary importance when it comes to the processing of policy controversies during blame games.

Crucially, the theoretical framework can tell us why some policy controversies develop into 'high stakes' blame games while other controversies are followed by 'below the radar' blame games that are only noticed indifferently. This is a decisive contribution to the literature on policy failures, political scandals, and media 'feeding frenzies', which often overlooks the question of why a controversy develops into a full-blown scandal (e.g., Barker, 1994; Sabato, 2000) or struggles to capture complex scandalization processes (Allern & von Sikorski, 2018). A comprehensive understanding of political conflict management requires considering instances of conflict management that proceed smoothly and those that are suppressed. The theoretical framework thus helps to make sense of a democratic conundrum: why venerable political scandals that attract strong attention from political actors, media, and the public do not necessarily produce significant consequences. The framework in this book replaces a simplistic view of the relationship between the level of public interest in a blame game and the extent of its consequences with a more accurate (and complex) picture of blame games and their consequences.

A theoretical framework that explains the political processing of a wide variety of policy controversies can illuminate the important political decisions and policy developments that occur during this processing – decisions and developments that are likely to go by the board if one only looks at policy conflicts from a very high level of generality. Many of these decisions and developments have implications that go beyond the particular blame games that triggered them. First, the framework allows for the identification of the conditions under which governments can leave severe and long-lasting policy problems unaddressed without facing any consequences. If publics do not care too much about the policy problem, like in the Swiss EXPO case, or if incumbents are isolated from blame, like in the UK political system, incumbents can afford to look elsewhere.

Second, and related, the framework also helps one to grasp why governments can stick to a policy even though the latter frequently fails and wastes huge amounts of taxpayers' money. Despite obvious and persistent failure, UK governments could afford to put off comprehensively reforming the child support system. The UK blame game style identified in this book goes a long way to explaining the persistence of arguably one of the most long-lasting policy failures in the history of the UK. As the CSA case exemplifies, in situations where strong blame barriers comfortably protect incumbent politicians from blame and criticism, there are only weak incentives to get the policy back on track.

Third, the framework provides insights into how even policies that work well can become politicized and be portrayed as utter failures. The Swiss blame game about the treatment of the youth offender named 'Carlos' is a case in point. Opponents were able to portray the therapy setting of the youth offender as over-expensive and wrong even though it had worked well and policy experts widely agreed that the Swiss juvenile justice policy was very effective. Confronted with distant-salient policy controversies, political opponents and media actors often go haywire and make a problem much bigger than it is.

Fourth, the framework recognizes that blame that gets anchored in public memory can have an impact on subsequent policy struggles. Even though opponents in the German DRONE case were unable to bring the incumbent minister to resign or to thoroughly reform the procurement practice of the German military, the blame game about the failed drone procurement made his successor unequivocally position herself against

procurement failures and initiate a long deferred reform process. By anchoring a policy problem in public memory, blame games can leave a long-term imprint on policy trajectories.

Finally, the framework provides insights into why political decision-makers, out of fear from blame, become complacent and submissive actors. In the Swiss blame game about the adequate treatment of severe youth offenders, incumbents indicated that they felt unable to brace themselves against the frantic attacks from opponents and the biting media coverage even though there was no clear policy failure and the policy for which they were responsible was actually successful. The CARLOS case thus exemplifies how incumbents often seem unable or unwilling to find the courage to stand up for policies that they deem worthwhile during particularly heated blame games.

Generalizing across Space and Time

The theoretical framework developed and tested in this book is tailored to explaining blame games in response to policy controversies. Policy controversies are at the heart of political struggle in modern, policy-heavy political systems. However, I claim that the framework can also help to understand other types of blame games and their consequences. As explained in Chapter 2, a wide variety of events can trigger political blame games, among them the personal wrongdoing of political actors, external threats, like natural catastrophes or foreign policy crises, and deliberate government decisions that impose losses on citizens. Institutional factors and issue characteristics should also help to explain the blame game interactions that follow in the wake of these controversial events. Like the blame game interactions that occur in response to policy controversies, blame games that occur in the aftermath of personal wrongdoing or external threats represent instances of political conflict management that occur in front of an audience. Nevertheless, I suspect that some tweaking and fine-tuning of the framework will be required to satisfactorily explain other types of blame games.

To account for blame game interactions in the wake of personal scandals, it is also important to consider the norms of political conduct that define blameworthy political behavior. These norms influence the amount of blame that opponents generate and predetermine the blame management approach that incumbents can pursue. With regard to

external threats, such as foreign policy crises or natural catastrophes, salience and proximity could be less of an issue for incumbents than when they are confronted with a domestic policy controversy. Both foreign policy crises and natural catastrophes often produce a 'rally-round-the-flag' effect that temporarily mutes public blame (Boin et al., 2008). This provides incumbents with valuable time to address the external threat and publicly frame it according to their needs. Also, when it comes to blame games in the wake of a loss-imposing government decision, such as pension cuts, political incumbents dispose of more room to maneuver than when addressing an unanticipated policy controversy. In stark contrast to unexpected policy controversies, political incumbents can usually prepare for a blame game about a loss-imposing decision by engaging in anticipatory forms of blame avoidance (Hinterleitner & Sager, 2017). For example, governments can often time an unpopular decision to make sure that losses do not become a major issue during elections or simply disappear behind other attention-absorbing events (Pal & Weaver, 2003). Timing unpopular decisions, making hidden cuts, or spreading losses broadly are strategies incumbents can employ when they have to retrench the welfare state (Hinterleitner & Sager, 2019; Wenzelburger, 2011; van Kersbergen & Vis, 2015). These strategies illustrate that when it comes to the 'politics of pain', incumbents can usually rely on a larger spectrum of blame-management strategies than during blame games about unexpected policy controversies. Finally, there are blame game triggers whose public evaluation is particularly ambiguous. The blame games examined in this book were all triggered by events that were clearly controversial in one way or another. In cases where the actors playing the blame game fiercely disagree as to whether a controversial event is actually controversial, incumbents should often not only play defense, but they should also be able to attack political opponents for starting a fire where a cool head is needed. It is in these cases that political opponents can often switch from blame management to credit claiming (Leong & Howlett, 2017). These reflections suggest that for the framework to be applicable to other types of blame games, additional contextual factors would have to be considered and the relative explanatory potential of institutional factors and issue characteristics would have to be reassessed.

It should also be possible to apply the framework in non-Western political settings, again with some tweaking and fine-tuning. For political blame games to develop at all, there needs to be an accountability

regime in place that allows political opponents or societal actors to hold incumbents accountable and to assign blame for that purpose (Bovens, 2007; Olsen, 2015). Without such a regime, incumbents could simply ignore blame or suppress blame makers. However, intercultural differences also need to be considered. For instance, there are important intercultural differences between conventions of assuming or denying responsibility for political actions and policy controversies. While in South Korea or Japan public apologies and admissions of responsibility are prevalent, in many Western political systems, they are tactics of last resort that incumbents only employ after all other blame-management strategies have been exhausted (Hood et al., 2009). Intercultural differences of this kind are very likely to inject specific dynamics into blame game interactions.

Finally, there is the question of how stable the blame game styles identified in this book are over time. Although institutionalized forms of conflict management are unlikely to change overnight, there are several reasons to expect that they are not as stable as other types of institutions and institutionalized practices. An obvious reason for changing blame game styles are shifting party landscapes. Many parliamentary systems currently witness the emergence of new parties. As systems change from two major parties to several smaller ones, the typical coalition dynamics that characterize blame game interactions in a political system are likely to switch.

Another reason for instability over time is the erosion of democratic norms. As microcosms of conflictual politics, blame games contain political interactions that often go against democratic norms. At a more general level, many democracies are currently characterized by a norm-eroding politics. Extreme statements and actions that violate democratic norms, like respect for political opponents, acceptance of election outcomes, or restraint in the exercise of political power, have become widespread within a surprisingly short amount of time (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Lieberman et al., 2019). Former US president Barack Obama captured these dynamics in a speech in South Africa: "We see the utter loss of shame among political leaders where they're caught in a lie and they just double down and they lie some more. It used to be that if you caught them lying, they'd be like, 'Oh, man' – now they just keep on lying."[1] As democratic norms importantly influence the patterns and conventions of responsibility attribution and admission in a political system, changes in these norms are likely to affect blame game styles.

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108860116.009 Published online by Cambridge University Press

A final possible reason for the instability of blame game styles over time is changing media systems. With the advent of social media has come the possibility that media systems fractionalize into filter bubbles and echo chambers. This would mean that blame games would no longer play out in front of one (major) audience but in front of multiple audiences that opponents and incumbents would have to address differently. Moreover, social media may help politicians to better sense the public's attitude toward a policy controversy, to predict its reaction, and to draft more effective blame-generation and blame-management strategies accordingly. One could also expect that the pervasion of social media could make blame game interactions 'faster', since traditional media outlets (as catalysts and transmitters) would be bypassed. Whether this is positive for incumbents (because specific blame games would become shorter and disappear from the news sooner) or negative (because blame game dynamics would become increasingly uncontrollable) is a question for future research. Overall, while certainly a fruitful exercise, there are reasons to be careful when applying the framework developed in this book to other types of blame games, political systems, and time periods.

Avenues for Future Research on Blame Games

The interesting and novel results obtained from the empirical analysis are a testament to the framework's significant explanatory potential. Nevertheless, it is not very surprising that three groups of institutional factors and two issue characteristics cannot fully account for every aspect of a complex blame game. Particularly when considering the amount of blame generation by opponents and the degree of activism by incumbents, I had to consider additional contextual factors. This suggests that one can achieve an even better understanding of blame games by painting a more detailed picture of the context in which blame game actors are positioned.

Another avenue to a deeper understanding of blame games would be to open up causal space for 'nonrational' behavior, that is, to also consider ideational and psychological explanations of opponent and incumbent behavior (Hay, 2011; Parsons, 2007). The framework developed in this book does not consider nonrational behavior because it is based on a structural and an institutional logic (Parsons, 2007). First, it treats institutions as fixed structures that make opponents and

incumbents act in certain ways by influencing the incentives and expected pay-offs of particular blame-generation and blame-management strategies (the structural logic). Second, the framework treats issue characteristics as 'institutions' with which actors work to reach their goals during blame games (the institutional logic). As explained in Chapter 2, treating issue characteristics as institutions highlights the fact that blame game actors can manipulate issue characteristics to a certain degree during blame games. Political institutions, on the other hand, are treated as unalterable structures that actors must take as given during a blame game. Conceiving the influence of institutional factors and issue characteristics in this way implies objective rationality on the part of opponents and incumbents since they are expected to react "regularly and reasonably to external constraints" (Parsons, 2007, p. 13). Treating political elites as rational decision-makers is reasonable because it allows for relatively parsimonious explanations of their actions.

Nevertheless, although there is research arguing that political elites are comparatively more rational than ordinary people since they base their decisions on abundant experience (Hafner-Burton et al., 2013), politicians also suffer from decision-making biases. Considering these biases in the study of blame games could allow one to craft more realistic explanations of specific blame-generation and blame-management approaches. This would require 'operationalizing' the decision-making biases exposed by researchers (Linde & Vis, 2017; Sheffer & Loewen, 2019; Sheffer et al., 2018) in the context of blame game interactions. For example, one could expect that incumbents' overconfident attitude during a blame game that currently attracts only weak public feedback is not due to their rational assessment of the level of current feedback but can be explained by incumbents' underestimation of the possibility that the blame game could develop into a full-blown and dangerous scandal. In the following, I briefly discuss three (groups of) factors that could be considered in future research on blame games.

Incumbents' Decision to Engage

The case studies reveal that the proximity of a controversy to incumbents is an important explanatory factor of blame game interactions. In the case of their direct involvement, incumbents are likely to receive more blame from opponents since the latter can more easily tie the controversy

to incumbents and turn it into a personal scandal. Therefore, it would be rational for incumbents to identify potentially controversial policies in advance and keep as much distance from them as possible (Hinterleitner & Sager, 2017; Leong & Howlett, 2017). This should even apply to policies that promise to allow for credit claiming, as incumbents are loss averse and therefore prefer avoiding blame over claiming credit (Weaver, 1986). Contrary to these expectations, the cases clearly show that there are instances in which incumbents deliberately choose to engage with potentially controversial policies. This 'nonrational' behavior may be due to miscalculations of the reputational risks attached to a policy, to a decision calculus in which credit claiming trumps blame avoidance, or to a strong 'ideational' attachment to a policy that induces incumbents to consciously put their reputation at risk. Future research should thus address the question of why and under which conditions political decision-makers opt to associate with a potentially risky policy issue or decide to stay away from it.

Resources Such as Intelligence, Argumentative Skills, or Popularity

In the case studies, I do not analyze the resources available to the actors playing the respective blame games. An important such resource is a political incumbent's popularity when entering a blame game. While the BER case suggests that even a popular politician can get worn down by an intricate policy problem, I did not consider his popularity as an asset that influenced how successfully he managed blame, and how long he could withstand the attacks of his opponents. Popularity among constituents could be conceived as a blame shield that allows incumbents to withstand blame attacks for longer. Considering assets such as popularity, intelligence, or argumentative skills could lead to a better understanding of why some blame-generation or blame-management approaches are more successful than others (Boin et al., 2010; Hinterleitner & Sager, 2017). Moreover, they could account for slight differences in blame generation or blame management within the same institutional and issue context. Opponents that exhibit plenty of these resources should be able to more quickly grasp the blame-generating potential of a controversy or more effectively exhaust the feedback potential of a controversy. Incumbents who can draw on these resources can be expected to be better able to credibly manage blame and select the blame-management approach that fits best with regard to a particular controversy.

Ideas about Policies and Norms of Decency

Another group of explanatory factors are the ideas that actors may hold about particular policies and the norms that may bind them when engaging in blame game interactions. On the one hand, opponents who have an ideational attachment to a policy may increase blame generation beyond the level warranted by issue characteristics. In the SOLYNDRA case, for example, ideational attachment to free markets could account for the Republicans' ongoing attacks of Obama's green energy program, even though the bankruptcy of the solar company clearly constituted a distant-nonsalient controversy. On the other hand, incumbents ideationally attached to a policy may choose to fervently defend it even though this might be foolish from a reputational point of view. Moreover, norms of decency may prevent opponents from too heavily exploiting a severe controversy for reputational or policy purposes. For instance, norms of decency might provide an additional explanation (next to the federal government's low involvement in the controversy) of opponents' relative restraint in exploiting the distant-salient NSU controversy for their political purposes.

However, there are also reasons to expect that norms and ideas are often subordinate to material considerations when it comes to explaining heated blame game interactions. In situations where actors face blame, they frequently prioritize material interests over ideational motives, as "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" (Weaver, 1986, pp. 377–378). Overall, I claim that the theoretical framework introduced in this book goes a long way to comprehensively account for blame game interactions and their consequences. At the cost of analytical parsimony, accounts of blame game interactions can of course be further refined by considering both additional contextual factors and psychological and ideational explanations.

9.2 The Study of Blame Games and Its Wider Implications

Blame games are important political events because they are one of the primary ways through which democratic political systems manage their policy controversies. And yet, the study of blame games does more than inform readers about how democracies come to terms with their policy problems. As microcosms of conflictual politics, the study of blame

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108860116.009 Published online by Cambridge University Press

games yields valuable insights that help us make sense of the more conflictual style of politics that modern democratic political systems currently experience on a wider scale.

As the empirical analysis makes clear, political interactions are very conflictual when political systems address their policy controversies during blame games. Political actors frequently attack their opponents, portray them as incompetent or guilty, exaggerate a controversy, and adopt an uncompromising stance. During blame games, political actors often bend the norms of democratic conduct. Recent political developments, from Trumpism in the USA, to Brexit-politics in the UK, to extremist right parties and populist movements all over Europe, suggest that conflictual politics are no longer an exception but tend to become the rule. Phenomena such as polarization, populism, blame generation, negative messaging, or attack politics are all manifestations of a widespread tendency toward intensified and more conflictual interactions between political actors (e.g., Hetherington, 2009; Hinterleitner, 2018; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013; Nai & Walter, 2015; Tushnet, 2003; Weaver, 2013, 2018).

In times when problems are often complex (Adam et al., 2019) and public budgets are in dire straits (Blyth, 2013), it is not very surprising that political actors struggle to satisfy public demands and, therefore, fight harder over available resources. If political conflicts are less and less characterized by positive-sum relationships, one man's gain becomes another man's loss. Despite these more difficult circumstances, there is no reason to expect that citizens will demand less from their leaders (Flinders, 2014). Politics still is, and will remain in the near future, a means of problem solving on citizens' behalf. As long as there are problems, citizens want their leaders to address them. But demanding citizens that cannot be pleased all the time tend to become dissatisfied with their leaders. This increases the incentives for political actors to play hardball and engage in a discourse that channels citizens' dissatisfactions. In short, the rise of conflictual politics is the result of political, economic, and societal circumstances that put political actors under pressure and accordingly prompt them to adopt different means to win votes and gain control over policies – means that are less promotive of political compromise and deal making.

It is surely tempting to assert that more conflictual politics has always been with us and that conflictual politics is nothing unusual (see Shea & Sproveri, 2012). Just as a football match in which players foul all the

time is still a football match, conflictual politics may still just be politics. However, the sheer scale of conflictual politics in Western democracies in recent years suggests otherwise. Moreover, by taking the long view, one comes to appreciate that democratic political systems, slowly but steadily, seem to use up the 'surplus of consensus' that characterized their trajectories during the decades that followed World War II. Earlier work, especially by Otto Kirchheimer (1957) and Robert Dahl (1965), shows that, back in the 1950s and 1960s, students of politics were aware of the fact that the postwar era had heralded a politics that was markedly different from earlier times. The time during which most of our (still dominant) theories of politics emerged was characterized by a "growing extent of agreement among political actors" on both policy and system issues (Mair, 2007, p. 6). Newly appreciating the exceptionality of this 'surplus of consensus' makes us aware of the fact that there is not just one invariant type of politics but that politics comes in different variants; some of them more conflictual than others. I claim that blame games help to make sense of the more conflictual variant. In the remaining pages of this book, I elaborate on what blame games suggest about politics and democracy under pressure.

Blame Games and Their Implications for Politics under Pressure

Political science, by and large, is not attuned to the thought that political systems work under varying degrees of conflict or that their politics heat up or cool down in response to the challenges they face. Political science usually conceives of political systems and their workings in a more static way, or conceptualizes them with regard to an important function. Bryan D. Jones and Frank Baumgartner's (2007) conceptualization of political systems as information management systems is a case in point. Most contemporary political science work, just like the diverse literature on problem processing (e.g., Hoppe, 2011; Richardson, 2014), adopts a static perspective on how political systems manage their controversies and address their conflicts. Since there is no explicit distinction between more and less conflictual politics in this research, there is the temptation to rely on a form of subliminal 'concept stretching', that is, the assumption that conflictual politics are not much different from normal politics and that our approaches for explaining the latter also work in case of the former.

This book shows that this assumption would be wrong: Conflictual forms of politics require distinct explanatory approaches. The theoretical framework developed and tested in this book contains explanatory factors that are not congruent with those commonly used to analyze political systems and their politics and policymaking styles, and the combinations in which these factors occur across political systems do not fit neatly into established categorizations (e.g., Lijphart, 2012). I argue that the factors known to structure normal politics, like the traditions of negotiated decision-making in Germany or the centralization of the UK system, do not necessarily help to make sense of conflictual politics; or they play a different role for conflictual politics. For example, the counterintuitive finding that blame games in the UK are less aggressive and consequential than those in Germany is at odds with conventional wisdom on the UK's venerable conflict culture and on the German system's consensual underpinnings. The blame game styles of these countries do not fit into existing categorizations. Likewise, while the formation of coalitions and majorities is important for both normal and conflictual politics, during the latter, small parties often assume a more important role than their size alone would suggest. The empirical analysis showed that smaller parties often manage to punch above their weight during blame games due to the media's interest in poignant statements. Again, conventional knowledge about normal politics cannot account for this aspect of (conflictual) blame game interactions.

Next to reconsidering and rearranging existing categorizations, it will also be necessary to consider additional factors in the study of conflictual politics. For instance, future research needs to more closely examine the characteristics of democracies that influence the distribution and attribution of responsibility, both within a political system as a whole and within particular policy areas. As an important part of the institutional terrain, policies decisively influence who can be held responsible and who can be forced to act. For example, controversies that occur in a policy area that has experienced widespread agencification reforms are processed differently than controversies that occur in a policy area where governments are more directly involved. When it comes to the study of more conflictual politics, one is well advised to recall E. E. Schattschneider's famous quote that "[n]ew policies create a new politics" (1935, p. 288). Some policy arrangements are more conducive to creating conflictual politics than others.

A second crucial implication for politics under pressure, which follows from the study of blame games, is an updated understanding of political elites and the goals for which they strive. In order to capture what political elites are really up to under conflictual conditions, we must simultaneously consider them as vote seekers and as policy seekers. As policy has become the main instrument through which the state governs, political conflicts increasingly revolve around policy (Orren & Skowronek, 2017; Pierson, 2007b). Policy thereby automatically assumes greater importance in the decision-making of political elites. As Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson put it (2014), in a conflictual democracy, gaining the 'prize of policy' is tantamount to gaining power. The greater importance of policy by no means implies that vote and reputation seeking become unimportant for political elites. In more conflictual times, a positive reputation constitutes an important blame shield for politicians (Hinterleitner & Sager, 2018). However, the blame games studied in this book suggest that the goals actors decide to pursue during policy conflicts are controversy-specific and influenced by the shape of the political system. Sometimes, reputational goals are within reach and thus pursued, sometimes policy goals are more important.

This is a crucial insight that remains overlooked by the wide and diverse literature on elite decision-making, which, for the most part, conceives political elites as reputation-conscious, vote-seeking political actors (Busuioc & Lodge, 2016). While this literature successfully uses behavioral insights to enrich our understanding of the processes through which political elites reach their decisions (Hafner-Burton et al., 2013, 2017; Linde & Vis, 2017; Vis, 2011), it has yet to broaden its focus with regard to the substantive goals that political elites pursue, that is, whether they pursue reputational and/or policy goals in a particular situation. Developing insights about the conditions under which political elites seek reputational and/or policy goals is imperative for understanding more conflictual political interaction.

An updated understanding of political elites' strategic behavior under pressure also serves a normative purpose. Unlike Bertold Brecht suggests in his play, *Life of Galileo*, it is not only difficult for "peoples to calculate the moves of their rulers": Evaluating them is also difficult. In times of heightened political conflict, however, critical evaluations are essential. Political elites play a crucial role in the erosion of democratic norms and in the exacerbation of democratic disaffection (Boswell et al., 2018;

Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). They can give in to populist temptations, for example, by inflating an issue, by calling for the resignation of an opponent (even in a situation where this is utterly excessive), by riding out an issue, or by brushing aside problem-oriented questions. In many situations, however, political elites can also resist doing so.

The study of blame games helps us to make realistic and fair evaluations about the actions of political elites by zooming in on the institutional and issue context in which they have to operate. The study of blame games allows us to assess political elites' room to maneuver in a controversial situation, the goals they pursue, and the strategies they employ. Answers to these questions are important preconditions for understanding and evaluating elite behavior. In times of widespread antiestablishment feelings and politics, context-sensitive assessments of elites' room to maneuver are essential for creating realistic expectations of them. By systematically considering what elites can do in particular contexts, we can come to normative judgments about good or bad elite behavior that "deal in facts" (Gerring & Yesnowitz, 2006, p. 108). Basing our evaluations of elite behavior on a realistic assessment of context is an interesting opportunity for connecting the 'positive' study of blame games with normatively valued issues.

Blame Games and Their Implications for Democracy under Pressure

Just as we need an updated understanding of what occurs in the political sphere under more conflictual conditions, we need to reconsider the role of citizens in a conflictual democracy. Traditional political science scholarship usually equates the 'citizen' with the 'voter'. Assessing the influence of citizens on politics and policy in representative democracies usually amounts to examining vote choice. What David Mayhew (1974) termed the 'electoral connection' is the primary transmission mechanism through which citizens communicate with the political sphere. This book shows that citizens not only exert causal influence on politics and policy in their role as voters but also in their role as spectators of policy conflicts. The way citizens watch a blame game has an important influence on its consequences. Blame games thereby act as another transmission mechanism between citizens and politics. Citizen preferences in the form of public feedback to a controversy are processed by the political system by means of blame

game interactions and lead to consequences that are more or less in line with citizen preferences. As we have seen, a lot of communication and information exchange between citizens and the political sphere occurs during blame games. On the one hand, blame games are testing grounds for political elites to discover whether and how much the public cares about particular parts of the policy infrastructure. On the other hand, blame games are opportunities for citizens to learn and form an opinion about a particular policy issue. Whether to invest in unmanned warfare, how to treat youth offenders, or whether to propel industrial change through governmental intervention are only some of the policy issues that citizens are confronted with in their role as spectators of blame games. While the blame game mechanism may interrelate with elections, it is nevertheless distinct. A policy controversy can develop into a blame game that alters the policy infrastructure without ever being treated in elections. Moreover, voters and spectators of policy conflicts do not necessarily overlap. Citizens, in their role as spectators of policy conflicts, may generate a specific mood that affects subsequent elections, but they may still decide not to take part in them.

A crucial insight here is that there are varieties of blame game transmission mechanisms across democratic political systems. As my typological theory of blame games and their consequences shows, political systems do not just 'pass through' public feedback, but they amplify, weaken, or altogether stall it during a blame game. While this book only analyzes three political systems in detail, the insights gained from their comparison are sufficient to conclude that some political systems are more responsive to citizen preferences during blame games than others. My analysis suggests that the UK political system exhibits a blame game mechanism that is much less responsive to the demands of citizens than the blame game mechanisms of the German and Swiss political systems. These insights call for more research on varieties of blame game transmission mechanisms.

If one accepts the finding that blame games are an additional transmission mechanism that connects citizens with politics and policy, then we must broaden our view of how democracies secure, or fail to secure, responsiveness to citizen preferences. Democratic responsiveness, in the words of G. Bingham Powell (2004, p. 91), is "what occurs when the democratic process induces the government to form and implement policies that the citizens want." In examining the connections between

citizen preferences and policy outcomes, the existing literature on the topic has not yet looked at the blame game channel but almost entirely focuses on elections (e.g., Hobolt & Klemmensen, 2007; Kang & Powell, 2010; Powell, 2011; Wlezien & Soroka, 2012). A reassessment of democratic responsiveness under more conflictual conditions must incorporate the insight that citizens, confronted with the overcrowded, controversy-laden political agendas of their political systems, do not only express their preferences as voters, but also through their role as spectators of blame games. This reassessment also provides us with a broader basis on which to assess the health of democracies. For Albert Hirschman (1994), it was vital to understand institutionalized forms of conflict management, as they are constitutive for the survival of democracies. A democracy that does not properly manage its conflicts risks being poisoned by them. This book shows that political conflict management not only occurs on a regular basis when citizens come to the ballot box but also when citizens watch seemingly routine and minor political quarrels, like the one about the chaotic launch of the healthcare .gov website or that about the Swiss 'lobbying affair'.