On Credit and Blame:
Disentangling the Motivations of Public Policy Decision-Making Behaviour

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Abstract:
While the idea that policymakers are motivated by the desire to earn "credit" for their work has a long history, policy studies since Weaver (1986) have also used the concept of "blame" to help understand many observed but little studied aspects of policy-making activity. These include the agenda-denial behaviour of politicians to the use of policy evaluations to paint overly positive pictures of the effectiveness and efficiency of policy efforts. Despite its frequent invocation by analysts, however, the status of "blame" and "credit" and their component parts is not well understood and different uses and conceptions of the term are frequent in the policy literature. This article addresses three issues surrounding the concepts which require clarification: first, the relationship between "blame" and "credit" as motivators of policy agents and activities; second, the related but not synonymous notions of "credit-claiming" and "blame avoidance" and their relationship to more primordial ideas of "blame" and "credit"; and, thirdly, the notions of 'reactive' vs 'anticipatory' blame avoidance and credit claiming behaviour. The article develops a framework to help move the discussion of these three elements and of the basic concept forward. It argues that blame especially should be studied more widely from the view of the public as well as the public official point of view, and that both concepts should be analysed as part of the larger issue of the legitimation of public actions rather than solely as an aspect of the utilitarian calculations and risk management activities of politicians and officials.

Introduction: Blame and Credit in Policy Studies

Credit claiming - or the attempt to declare policy a success, and to paint a leader, minister or party as responsible for that success and worthy of praise, promotion, re-election or re-appointment - has often been alleged to be a prime motivator or public policy-makers, not least by public choice theorists of the 1980s and 1990s (Dunleavy 1986; Ulen 1990). This notion of decision-maker behaviour was joined later by the idea of 'blame avoidance", cast as a second explanatory variable for bureaucratic or political self-preservation (Weaver 1986) and establishing the basis for a form of "cost-benefit" approach to decision-making conceived as a process of rational risk minimizing-reward maximizing behavior (Hood, 2002).

Since then it has often been claimed that either or both behaviours are commonly observed in policy-making. Such activities have received detailed treatment in the policy

literature (see for example, Twight 1991) and within the literature of new public management, for example, the rhetoric of "distancing and blaming" (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2004) captures one use of blame avoidance to explain and predict bureaucratic behavior in risk-filled situations. More recently, blame avoidance has been used to explain overly-cautious political reactions to policy problems, or what has been termed "policy under-reactions" (Maor, 2016, Howlett, 2014). In fact, in the present era the idea that credit claiming and blame avoidance are key motivating forces of politicians and other policy-makers has become ubiquitous both in academia and in political life, and in public perceptions of these activities.

In general, these concepts serve as the basis for a rational choice or utilitarian re-working of classical political concepts of prudence and judgment, reducing complex deontological and normative discussions to calculations of individual self-interest and electoral, or administrative, advantage. But, to conceive of credit and blame in utilitarian terms is to ignore the richness of the concept both in itself and in its application in answering several long-standing policy puzzles around public policy decision-making behaviour.

Such analyses miss the important aspect of these two concepts that aside from providing an incentive for policy makers to act in certain ways (or to refrain from them) they also have strong ties to public perceptions and attitudes which ultimately ascribe blame or grants credit for policy-making activities. That is, both concepts are behavioural but also capture components of key structural and institutional issues surrounding the accountability of officials and politicians for their actions. They are thus are tied to

complex notions of legitimacy and to equally complex arrangements in government intended to ensure responsibility, and transparency, in government activity.

Blame especially is an indicator of accountability usually tied closely to individual agency – an action is blameworthy if it causes some harm as the direct result of an act and the source of action is invariably tied to an individual actor. But blaming someone is not merely naming or holding that person responsible in a neutral or objective manner; attributing blame rather holds an additional element of culpability and moral sanction which detracts from the ability of that individual to continue to act in the public interest. "For example, we blame people and organizations where we feel they have violated some moral norm, and an extreme form of blame is outrage" (Wolff, 2006). We blame someone that is, when they behave in such a manner as they ought not to have acted. And acting in such a manner undermines the legitimacy or license of that individual to claim to act on behalf of the public not only in the present and future, but also often retrospectively.

Attributions of both blame and credit thus occur within broader considerations of legitimacy, including a substantive moral dimension as to whether a decision is perceived to be right or wrong *per se*; what Scharpf (1999) called "output" legitimacy. This exists as well as a procedural dimension concerning whether a decision is perceived to have been made in accordance with agreed principles and protocols, or what Scharpf referred to as "throughput" legitimacy or whether individuals and agencies are morally sanctioned to create policies and take decision, or what Scharpf termed "input" legitimacy (Scharpf 1999).

Ascribing blame therefore, is not just a matter of the evaluation of the character and value of a policy but is also a matter of determining agency and culpability within a set of social and political norms which is in itself a complex matter. It is thus also a function of emotions and cognitive biases of members of the public involved in the evaluation – that is, a matter of subjective perception linked to frames through which the actions of governments, politicians and administrators are constructed and viewed, such as those linked to institutionalized or collectively held views of the appropriate, and inappropriate, role of government in society, or the economy, or world.

Determining culpability thus requires both a knowledge of what is considered to be credit or blame-worthy behaviour, and not just the availability of key information regarding how actions occurred and evolved, of the chain of causation between a policy stance and an undesired outcome, and the ability to judge whether such as outcome could reasonably have been foreseen or avoided by those involved; what Howlett (2014) has termed the "intentionality" and "avoidability" of actors and outcomes.

Determining "credit" is similarly constrained. Credit is generally not extended for actions which would have occurred notwithstanding an effort and "credit" in the sense used here is thus similar to 'blame' in that it requires a judgment as to the extra-ordinary nature of policy-makers' efforts, without which a laudable policy or outcome would not have occurred. Such judgments equally require information concerning responsibility for these actions as well as their evolution and impact.

This makes understanding blame, and credit, in absolute terms, a complex matter. And this complexity is increased when it comes to decision-maker behaviour itself, since linking blame and credit to behaviour requires not only an 'objective' assessment of the

two but also an assessment of the capability of both the public and decision-makers to make accurate judgments, or even inaccurate ones, about them. Dealing with such objective and perceptual aspects of these questions, we argue, requires holding a richer concept of blame and credit than is usually held by policy analysts and scholars. In particular, it requires more careful examination of the role of the publics casting blame and ascribing credit, how decision-makers assess this, the reasons why decision-makers might choose to avoid blame or garner credit, and how they are able to accomplish this, or not, as the case may be, than is commonly undertaken in policy analyses.

There are three particular aspects of these issues which are addressed below: the relationship between considerations and ascriptions of credit and blame; that between credit and blame and credit claiming and blame avoidance; and that between reactive ex-post and anticipatory ex-ante avoidance and claims.

The first issue concerns the common tendency in the literature to look at blame and credit separately. This acknowledges that acts of ascribing blame and giving credit are closely linked, as are those of avoiding blame and claiming credit. But how these concepts are linked is poorly developed in the literature with little empirical evidence concerning which label is applied when and with what effect. One of the aims of this paper is to clarify these links and propose a coherent structure of how they are tied together.

The second area concerns the relationship between credit and credit-claiming, and blame and blame avoidance. The nature of the characteristics of policies that lend themselves to avoidance and claiming behaviour is little studied. However, these can be linked to particular kinds of institutional and other practices in government around issues

and practices of accountability and transparency and the paper clarifies these issues and relationships.

The third area concerns the dynamics of credit-claiming and blame avoidance – what are the processes by which policy actors avoid, and policy publics ascribe, blame and credit? There is a difference between reactive versus anticipatory blame avoidance and credit claiming - that is, between behaviour linked to avoiding the consequences of an act after it has occurred or before it has been enacted or implemented – but this distinction and its implications remain underdeveloped in the field.

We examine these questions by looking to activities such as policy innovation and change which are policy outputs often linked to utility calculations in rational choice analyses in the sense that actions will not be undertaken if decision-makers perceive blame to "exceed" credit. To address this issue, we propose a typology outlining the varieties of blame and credit which helps to clarify the relationships and prerequisites of each.

In answering the question "How does blame matter?" we also come to a fresh answer to the query "Why does blame matter?" We find ourselves dissatisfied with the traditional answer of blame avoidance and credit claiming as the result of a bureaucratic risk calculus; instead, we argue that blame and claim should be conceived of within a larger political effort by publics to hold public officials accountable, and by governments to gain legitimacy rather than simply as manifestations of individual actor calculus of benefits and costs, or utility.

The Concepts of Blame and Credit and Their Relationship to Public Policy-Making

As Hood (2002 and 2010) and others before him argued (for example McGraw 1990 and 1991), due to the often-precarious nature of their positions at the apex of power, most politicians and decision-makers, especially but not limited to democratically elected ones, are risk averse. That is, they seek to avoid failures for which they can be plausibly be held responsible, while they are also opportunistic and will claim credit for policy successes in order to enhance their chances of re-appointment, re-election and career advancement (Skogstad 2007; Walsh 2006).

It is often alleged that the kind of behaviour described by Hood and others is a key aspect of public policy-making in both democratic and other kinds of states (Ingram and Mann 1980; Wolman 1981; Peters and Hogwood 1985; Anheier 1999; Hood 2010; McConnell 2010a and 2010b, Howlett 2009 and 2012). Although there is some debate as to whether or not such considerations should be weighted equally - Weaver's analysis for example argues that most officeholders seek "above all, not to maximize the credit they receive but to minimize blame," a view reiterated by Twight (1991) and more recently by Hood (2010) – the idea of decision-making emerging from, and decision-makers engaging in, an ongoing calculus of blame and credit is part and parcel of everyday media and other discourses and political punditry.

But the reasons why this should be the case are not well known. Engaging in such a balancing act, for example, is in itself a risky endeavour, as there is always the risk of claiming credit for failures, or avoiding blame for what turn out to be successes, and other paradoxes which make decisions in these matters far from automatic and easy.

Explaining observations of such credit and blame motivated behaviour, thus requires careful analysis and explication. While blame and credit are inherently linked concepts, the relationships between them and subsequent behaviours in the first instance may best be approached, as Hood (2010) has argued, from the perspective of blame.

Hood (2010), for example, argued (pp. 9-10) that Weaver's observation about the unequal weighting of blame over credit could be explained by viewing blame avoidance behaviour as a manifestation at the political level of a more general anthropological human trait: a 'negativity bias' in which negative news and information is paid more attention than positive information. That is, it is:

(i)s a phenomenon that goes under various names, one of which is 'negativity bias'. Negativity bias denotes a commonly observed cognitive tendency for more attention to be paid to negative than to positive information and for losses to be valued more highly than gains of an equivalent amount.

Many other policy and organization studies have argued decision-maker behaviour is linked more closely to the anticipation and avoidance of policy failures than to claiming credit. In Felstiner *et al's* (1980) sociological analysis of the emergence of legal disputes, for example, three steps of "naming, blaming and claiming" provide a glimpse into the ontology of blame and credit. There an act is considered "blameworthy" when it is "any experience that is disvalued by the person to whom it occurs" (1980:634). Such an experience cannot be amorphous, but instead must be a "perceived injurious experience" (1980: 633).

As a consequence of this, it might be presumed that instances of credit claiming are much rarer than often supposed (Weaver 1988) or, to put it another way, as Hood (2010) and Balla et al (2002) and others have argued, that given the potential consequences of each course of action, risk-averse policymakers will normally more highly value the avoidance of blame than the possible gaining of credit (Twight 1991). Although grounded in prospect theory and some of the insights of behavioural economics and psychology, it is not clear, for example, from public opinion and other surveys that this bias holds at the collective level.

Rather, little evidence of this valuation on the part of decision-makers and policy actors exists (Alexander et al 2014). The "paradox of social resilience" (Shaw *et al*, 2014), for example, argues the reverse. For example, the act of coping with problems gives people what the writers call the "delusion of resilience". This happens when coping mechanisms, such as accepting change and self-organisation, leads individuals to believe or act as if they are more resilient or able to cope with problems than they are in reality. In Shaw's study of the response of elderly people to coastal flood risk, this self-perception influenced self-reliance in two ways – first, people under-estimated the risk of their situation and over-estimate their ability to cope with floods, while those who were "hardened preparers", or people who went to considerable lengths to be resilient (such as storing food and supplies and preparing for the "worst") tended to perceive themselves to be more self-reliant than they actually were and often to expose themselves to greater risks than might have been the case if they were more cautious.

This paradox and outcome is due to the fact that the act of coping *itself* may create a false sense of resilience, and may result in the *withholding* of blame if individuals are

said to be responsible for their fates rather than policy-makers. Combined with the counter-tendency to also withhold blame when the responsibility for addressing an issue is diffuse, for example, in climate change policies (Howlett 2014), which makes it difficult to ascribe blame to any particular individual or body, this can often mean accurate judgments about who should be given blame or credit for an issue are not made. Similarly, when a problem is largely invisible or difficult to track, it again makes it difficult to arrive at generalizations of blame and credit worthiness or a consensus about to whom these should be attributed.

A second explanation often put forward for any asymmetry in blame and credit worthiness and ascription is that blame avoidance and credit-claiming are related less to inherent human traits and personality quirks than they are functions of rational behaviour in given institutional contexts. This is the case, for example, with studies which see blame avoidance as a function of electoral practices in democratic systems which hold governments accountable for their actions and where "retrospective" voting is thought to centre on voter analyses and evaluations of the track record of a government and assessments of its composition in terms of success and failure, and thus blame and credit (Weaver 1989; Pal and Weaver 2003). However, even here this analysis relies on thin evidence of the ability of average citizens to make such assessments; the extent to which they actually do so; and even in this second case, the extent to which these judgments determine their votes (Rapeli, 2016).

Thus, the relationship between credit and blame ascription and worthiness and decision-making is not clear. In many cases the proponents of some action may invoke credit while opponents may ascribe blame for the same activity and outcome. Such

tendencies can be heightened by the partisan application of such labels to opponents and in most cases, governments and actors expect to, and achieve, both blame and credit for their actions at the same time. Their motivation is thus less purely avoiding blame or claiming credit, or even attempting to maximize the latter and minimize the former, than rather simply to emerge from a policy situation with their legitimacy or ability to continue to act in their current capacity intact.

Motivations: Crediting and Blaming Behaviours Reconsidered

If we conceive of credit and blame opportunities and perceptions as subjectively and societally-determined, existing and overlapping, then two further issues in the policy literature require clarification: the relationship between credit and credit claiming, and blame and blame avoidance; and the difference between reactive and anticipatory blame avoidance and credit claiming.

The Balancing of Credit Claiming versus Blame Avoidance on Policy Activity

As we have seen, blame avoidance and credit claiming are both highlighted separately in the policy literature as motivating factors or mechanisms behind the activity and behaviour of decision-makers. However, some studies do examine them and their interactions conjointly. Several examples of these studies are set out in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Credit and Blame as dual motivations

Author/ Year/ Journal	Policy investigated	Variable of analysis/ methodology	Findings
Kang and Reich (2014) *Health Policy*	Priority-setting in health policy from a political perspective	Case study: political strategies and behaviors of policy makers in the priority-setting of	Korean policy makers use both "credit claiming" and "blame avoidance" strategies depending on policy context. They delegate

		health care resource allocation in Korea's National Health Insurance	responsibility for potentially blame-worthy decisions to an outside institution while claiming credit for decisions to expand benefits.
Nelson (2016) Journal of *Comparative Policy Analyses*	"Strategic framing" of social policy retrenchment by governments	Case studies: framing of reform strategies by governments in France and Germany to appeal to voters	Governments endeavor to make voters more open to retrenchment by appealing to other aspects of their belief systems.
Anderson (2009) *Administrative Theory & Praxis*	Accountability as collaborative discourse	Framework of accountability	The use of both "credit claiming" and blame avoidance" strategies indicate that political strategies go beyond the self-interested preferences and include group-related characteristics such as immigration and social trust.
Jensen, Malesky, Medina, and Ozdemir (2014) *International Studies Quarterly*	To show that the "competition" for investment capital has political payoffs	Randomised survey (United States)	Using credit and blame to frame accountability results in an illusion that we are in control and inhibits frank and open accounting. Instead, accountability would be more productive if it is a process of openness and collaboration.
Mortensen (2013) *Local Government Studies*	Investigating the relationship between the decentralization of formal authority and public attribution of blame and credit.	Regression analyses (Healthcare issues in Denmark)	Addresses the political motivations for offering generous incentives to attract investments despite uncertainties involved. These incentives allow US politicians to take credit for investments that flow into their districts and deflect blame when investors relocate.

These studies, for the most part, continue to fall into the category of "utility" analyses, that is, linking the behaviour of policy-makers to calculations of the ratio of benefit ("credit") to cost ("blame"). However, it is also possible to suggest that some circumstances and situations may promote one rather than the other behaviour. The literature on policy dynamics, for example, suggests that adopting a 'courageous' policy initiative with a large downside possibility of failure and adverse consequences in terms of electoral fortunes, reputation or legitimacy is not a prospect likely to appeal to many

policy-makers who require these status-enhancing characteristics in order to remain, or remain effective, in their present (and future) positions (Mortensen 2012).

Innovations, for example, are by definition risky initiatives with uncertain outcomes and although some circumstances may suggest to some decision-makers that taking action is less risky than not taking any, these are exceptions which prove the general rule – such as when new participants advocate change in order to distinguish or distance themselves from older decisions or are willing to accept the risk of failure rather than risk obscurity. This often occurs, for example, when a new government or official wishes to clearly distinguish themselves from the record of their predecessors and are less concerned with blame than with claiming credit for so doing (Huitema and Meijerink 2010).

This can be seen, for example, in the case of welfare policy innovations. A person who has had their welfare payouts cut from an excessively high amount may not be harmed in the sense that they may still be able fulfill basic needs. But would they still perceive themselves to have suffered a loss, and hence would perceive the policy-makers responsible for the cuts to be blameworthy and would be likely to punish them at the polls for undertaking this action. If this is true, then politicians and policy-makers may be loath to cut welfare payouts. This is Pierson's argument (1994, 2001) on the "political logic" of welfare retrenchment.

But most observers would agree that to see welfare retrenchment as an arena for blame avoidance and welfare expansion as an opportunity for individual-level credit and blaming is too simple. A policy affects many groups of people simultaneously – so that a cut in welfare benefits for example, may allow a policy maker to claim credit from those

who have to pay less tax to fund these benefits while simultaneously exposing him- or herself to blame from those whose benefits have been cut. And, many studies have shown that governments may not suffer electorally (Giger and Nelson, 2011, Schumacher, 2012, Schumacher et al, 2013) from welfare cuts, and may in fact be able to outweigh attributions of blame from such action with claim of credit for their austerity drives (Davidsson and Marx, 2013).

Thus, even what might be considered to be a simple and clearcut issue of blame and credit attribution and calculation turns out to be much more ambiguous and linked to judgments made by policy actors not just about whether or not they will be held responsible or able to claim credit for their actions, but by how many and what type of other policy-relevant actors. The electoral calculations made by policy-makers thus turn not on absolute issues of credit and blame but on relative ones, especially those which weigh blame and credit against eachother but not in the straightforward fashion employed by a utility logic.

Hence while avoidance of blame and maximization of credit might appear at first glance to be a simple maxim to follow in considering any kind of policy activity, the impact of actions on public popularity and their real and estimated electoral consequences all involve complex calculations, requiring at minimum a fine calibration in the assessments of individual and public credit and blame made by policy-makers ostensibly motivated by these concerns, and include many opportunities for mistakes and errors in judgment, let alone changes in circumstances and opinion over time which can render earlier calculations moot.

The Relationship between Credit and Credit Claiming, and between Blame and Blame Avoidance

We have seen how blame is a concept linked to notions of 'harm' or "cost" and credit to 'gain' or "benefit". And we have also seen how in the context of public policy the notions of "harm" and "gain" are difficult to determine objectively, that is in the measurement4 of assessment of actual benefits gained or lost or costs imposed or avoided. Rather these judgments have a strong subjective component, reflecting the specific "public" that is affected by, and interested in, the policy.

Both "harm" and "gain" for which someone is to be blamed, are also often conceived of personally, as well as collectively, and can be affected by the nature of the policy itself in terms of its innovativeness or standard character, and institutionally in the sense that some systems, notably representative democratic ones, which may be more prone to these kinds of calculations due to their electoral aspects and consequences. But what does "avoiding" and "claiming" blame and credit mean?

Hood's (2010) work on blame and policy failures is instructive in this context in terms of how the two attributions can be applied to the behaviour of policy-makers. He has argued that the attribution of failure to a policy, and thus the need for action on the part of policy-makers to avoid such blame, is greater the more it is perceived by the public not only that a problem exists or not, but that a government might have been able to avoid or prevent a problem but failed to act appropriately. In other words, the higher the risk of blame, the higher the propensity for blame and thus blame avoidance and vice versa for credit and credit-claiming.

The gap between blame and blame avoidance, and credit and credit claiming, that is, between problem visibility, public blame or credit attribution and policy-maker

behavior, is potentially a key aspect affecting and explaining how policy-makers respond to a problem. The result of policy-makers' perceptions of blame credit attribution, for example, can be a politically sustained under-reaction and negative policy efforts or an over-reaction and excessive policy activity (Maor 2016; Howlett 2014). For instance, politicians in democracies governments often fear the electoral consequences of undertaking costly measures in the short run, and hence may take only those types of measures which minimize negative blame or maximize positive credit in what they perceive to be the eyes of voters, even if such judgments are incorrect or problems are immediately pressing and demand action (Jacobs 2008).

From an electoral or legitimacy standpoint, this implies that as long as a problem has low public visibility and a low scope or range of impact, despite its potential or actual seriousness, such a problem does not necessarily require any government ameliorative or corrective action in order for a government to escape blame for failing to deal with it (Howlett 2014). In such situations governments may only require small-scale changes to policy instrument settings in order to be seen as 'doing something' or 'enough' about a problem to secure credit or avoid blame. The relative success or failure of these efforts to actually correct the problem is less significant than the perception of having undertaken an 'appropriate response' in the eyes of policy and politically-relevant actors and publics (Maor 2016; Maor et al 2017).

Conversely, other situations with higher levels of public awareness may require more attention and action from government (Stone 1988) even if the actual extent of the problem is less severe than perceived. These include most prominently cases in which high public problem visibility combines with a large scope of impact such as in dealing

with petty crime or immigration. Here changes in high level goals and instrument preferences may be necessary to display the requisite number and level of significant government efforts needed to avoid blame for a perceived problem, regardless of its actual incidence or impact. These responses may amount to political theatre and not be required by the technical nature of the problem but are nevertheless demanded by the perceptions of policy-makers that they need to avoid public blame for not doing "enough" about an issue.

The perceptual relationship between blame and blame avoidance, and credit and credit claiming, also helps to explain "negative" policy efforts such as agenda denial or attacks on opponents of the government in power. That is, there is also often an alternative, potentially cheaper strategy to actually dealing with an issue: even when the scope and (potential) visibility of a problem is high governments can also invest in strategies of discrediting or eliminating those arguing for larger efforts (Harrison and Sundstrom 2010; Howlett 2014).

Blame and blame avoidance, and credit and credit claiming, are hence two phenomena linked closely together by the need for policy-makers to retain their legitimacy, that is, to be seen to be responding to the "public interest" in their activities. The link between the fact of blame or credit and the effort to avoid to gain it, is one situated in the granting of the licence to act on their behalf by the stakeholders and participants in public policy-making. It is not an automatic relationship but rather one based on decision-makers' *perceptions* of what is acceptable, or not, to policy publics. And, again, mistakes can and are made in these attributions which are difficult to predict and subject to change.

Dynamics of Blame and Credit: Reactive vs Anticipatory Blame Avoidance and Credit Claiming

This brings us to the third clarification – the timing of blame avoidance and credit-claiming strategies. Political logic does not determine outcome without political context – and a complete conception of "blame" and "credit" requires an analysis of the temporal element in blame and credit attributions and claims. It matters whether public officials act as they do in anticipation of blame and credit and work to head it off or garner as much as possible, or because they are reacting to a current situation for which the public has already ascribe blame or credit. Attributions of blame and credit and their targets exist in different configurations not only in different issue areas but also over time, and much blame and credit behaviour is anticipatory rather than reactive. That is, public officials actually making policy decisions can anticipate such biases and seek to anticipate and deflect not just actual or perceived blame and credit attributions of the moment but also potential blame and credit circumstances in the future.

That is, both blame and blame avoidance and credit and credit-claiming can be *ex-post* or an *ex-ante* activities and understanding which occurs and why is an important question in the field. Glimpses of these temporal aspects of blame and credit behaviour are scattered throughout policy studies of the role of public perceptions in policy-making. One example lies in the long-standing but seldom tested "Devil Shift" within the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF), for example. The ACF sees beliefs as causal drivers of policy change, with coalitions comprising different stakeholder groups defined by their respective beliefs. The basic assumption is that policy participants specialize and seek to join a coalition in order to influence policy. These coalitions, in turn, "strive to

translate components of their belief systems into actual policy before their opponents can do the same" (2007, p.196).

The ACF thus has a particular model of the individual which fits perfectly into the mainstream blame avoidance paradigm outlined here - rational beings, subject to the same emotion and psychological biases as those outlined by Weaver (1986), Quattrone & Tversky (1988) and Munro (2002) will join with others and act in the same way towards policies, policy-makers, allies and opponents. These tendencies can result in "angel attributions" and "devil shifts" where coalition members exaggerate the positive and negative motives, behavior, and influence of allies and opponents (Sabatier, Hunter, & McLaughlin, 1987) and seek to monopolize the awarding of credit or ascription of blame. Coalitions engaging in such shifts tend to cast more blame and give less credit than is due to their opposition and vice-versa with their fellow coalition members.

The idea of pre-emptive or anticipatory blame avoidance implies that governments actively can actually manage such blame and credit dynamics, thereby constituting an additional intervening factor between the 'nature' of the policy problem and the response to it (Weaver 1986). Altering regulatory arrangements to make them less effective, undermining interest groups by reducing their funding, preventing research into problems and other such techniques are all examples of such policies which can affect future blame and credit opportunities and behaviours.

This helps explain why, in the case of climate change, for example, the initiatives taken in many countries to combat global warming have often been procedural and negative in character (Harrison and Sundstrom 2010). These include active problem denial and attacks on proponents of greater action on the issue (Howlett 2014). These can

be understood as part of an effort to pro-actively avoid blame which could result from greater activity in the area in the context of a public which awards no or little credit for more purposive actions (see also Maor et al. 2017). Low levels of dispersed public attention and concern allow policy-makers to escape blame for current inaction and continue to attack opponents of inaction in order to forestall criticisms and blame.

This is not to say that *reactive* avoidance and credit claiming does not exist. However, it has a different problematic than anticipatory action since avoiding blame *ex post* is more difficult to effect since *prima facie* it is more difficult to convince the public that one is not blameworthy after the fact than before such a designation has been made. Such reactive efforts can result in a 'blame game' (Drew & Grant, 2017) of 'blame-shifting, buck passing, and risk transfer' (Hood, 2007, p.199) which Weaver (2013) notes that this can generate "cynicism and disgust on the part of the electorate" (2013: p. 2) which can backfire at the polls. And in terms of policy impact, by engaging in deliberately obfuscating blame avoidance behavior, decision makers veer further away from their policy agendas into one driven by a media-sponsored scandalization of events (Hinterleitner & Sager, 2015).

A notable case of successful ex-post blame avoidance is the Australian government's handling of the AWB Limited scandal in 2005—2006, when the newly privatized Australian Wheat Board was found to have made payments to Saddam Hussein's Iraqi regime in exchange for lucrative wheat exports (McConnell et al, 2008). While this incident attracted intense media scrutiny and warranted an official inquiry, the Howard administration emerged with minimal reputational damage and no ministerial resignations by arguing that it was largely unaware of what rogue company officials had
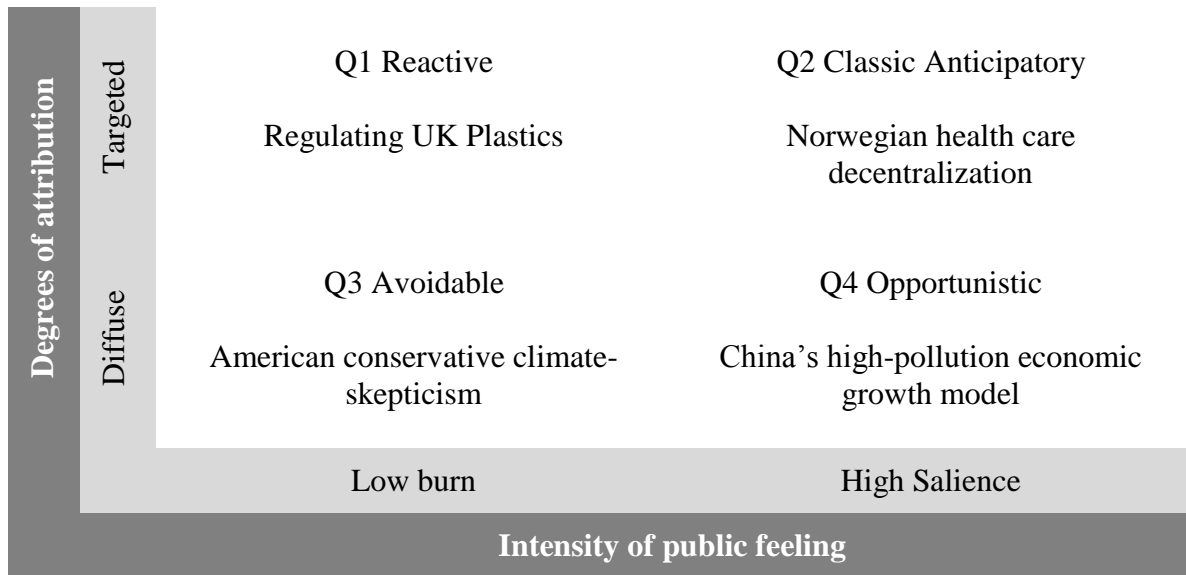
done and that it could not be blamed for giving arms-length corporations the freedom to manouevre they had.

For the majority of cases, however, an ex-post blame avoidance strategy is difficult to execute. Ex-post blame avoidance is less dependent on the actual content of policy decisions, and more on the contingency strategies and self-preservation instincts of the decision makers, based on a series of institutional and non-institutional factors, as well as the different constellations of actors at play, including the media and other non-state ones (Hinterleitner & Sager, 2015). And, even if negative repercussions appear to have been provisionally contained, there is still the chance of a 'rebound' (McConnell et al, 2008) in the future when the issue may reappear or metastasize in light of further subsequent events. This is evident in the AWB case where the subsequent election of the Labor government to replace the Howard administration again raised the issue, and introduced a new policy to end the practice of monopoly marketing.

Discussion: The Dynamics of Blame and Credit Attribution

Having made these clarifications, it is possible to put forward a typology of blame and credit (Figure 1) evading and enhancing which links them to the intensity of public feelings and the degree to which attribution of blame or credit to a public official is possible. This broad typology helps show how the actions of public officials can better be understood as ways of retaining their legitimacy, rather than as utility calculations. It also helps show how shifts in credit and blame strategies occur and interest with eachother.

Figure 1: Varieties of Policy Blame Avoiding and Credit Enhancing Strategies

Degrees of attribution	Targeted	Q1 Reactive Regulating UK Plastics	Q2 Classic Anticipatory Norwegian health care decentralization
	Diffuse	Q3 Avoidable American conservative climate-skepticism	Q4 Opportunistic China's high-pollution economic growth model
		Low burn	High Salience
		Intensity of public feeling	

Efforts to retain substantive output legitimacy through blame avoidance can be seen in the work of conservative think-tanks in the US dealing with voters' concerns around the issue of inaction on climate change (Jacques et al 2008). Such think-tanks, in funding and endorsing climate-skeptical literature, are engaged in an 'elite-driven' blame avoidance strategies (364) intended to downplay the effects of climate change. This is expected by them to enhance the substantive legitimacy of conservative policies which neglect the issue and instead promote American ideals such as 'limited government' and 'private property rights' in order to retain the favour and credit of party stalwarts (355). That is, this is a variety of the *"avoidable blame"* strategy found in Figure 1.

The impact of this legitimation strategy relying both on blame avoidance and credit claiming can be seen in the gradual decline of public concern for environmental issues since the 1990s, allowing the US federal government to retreat from international environmental agreements (Sussman 2004: 358, quoted ibid) and other efforts in the area

without suffering undue electoral harm. On the other hand, in countries like China, where environmental issues have a higher salience because of the presence of obvious smog and haze in all of the country's major cities, the strategy is more one of "*opportunistic blame avoidance and credit claiming.*" Thus, Heggelund *et al* (2010) show how China's current rhetoric on economic growth similarly constitutes a blame avoidance-credit claiming strategy which allows climate change to be framed as a foreign policy issue and hence put under the purview of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs rather than being dealt with as a pressing domestic issue. In so doing, the domestic salience of such issues for domestic populations is reduced while simultaneously increasing credit claiming opportunities for economic growth.

Both blame and credit are also used as procedural legitimation devices to enhance input and throughput legitimacy. This is the case, for example, involving Norwegian public sentiment (as represented by newspapers) around health issues before and after a major Norwegian hospital reform in 2002 (Mortensen 2013). The reform involved a shift from national public administration entities to regional health enterprises with separate professional boards operating outside of the central government. Although cuts in services were involved, the shift in public responsibilities also shifted what the public deemed procedurally legitimate, as the blame for health issues shifted from the central government to regional authorities after the reform. This falls under what is referred to in Figure 1 as a "*classic anticipatory*" blame avoidance-credit claiming strategy.

Of course, governments and policy makers are not omniscient: mistakes can be made and priorities and strategies change. First, as noted above, uncertainty over substantive and procedural legitimacy, that is, over what exactly will occur as a result of

a policy intervention and what the public perceives to be legitimate, can create and constrain opportunities for blame avoidance or credit claiming. The effect of uncertainties over substantive legitimacy or over what exactly is the impact of a policy – or a lack thereof - can be seen in the case of the delay in UK food contact plastics regulation from the 1950s-80s (Rothstein 2003). Food contact plastics were a relatively novel technology at the time and there was little information on the toxicity, migration rates of plastics chemicals into foods, and even the chemicals involved. The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food was reluctant to formally regulate the industry, and instead actively encouraged the development of a self-regulatory regime under the British Plastics Federation (BPF). However, it covered its bases by also refusing official sanction for the BPF's self-regulatory arrangements. As such, it manifested a blame avoidance strategy of first divesting itself from the responsibility for comprehensive regulation, exploiting uncertainties relating to the substantive legitimacy of regulatory policies regarding food contact plastics, while at the same time retaining procedural legitimacy which would allow it to intervene if problems developed.

Similarly, the effect of uncertainties over procedural legitimacy can be seen in the controversial case of an urban brownfield site in the UK (Catney and Hennebury 2012). Due to ongoing policy negotiations in Parliament regarding contaminated land policy across the UK, local authorities found an opportunity to exploit institutional uncertainty regarding procedural legitimacy - over who was a legitimate actor responsible for the contaminated site - to intentionally delay decisions on a formal risk classification of sites, and thus avoid having to bear the costs of alleviate the substantive risks involved in leaving the site as is. Both cases may be seen as example of *reactive blame avoidance*.

How shifts occur between types is another issue which this approach can help uncover. The political framing of issues affects the public perception of what constitutes substantive or procedural legitimacy and hence criteria of blame and credit are not fixed. Successful (re)framing of issues may aid both blame avoidance and credit-claiming strategies. Burgess (2012), for example, describes how the framing of the Eyjafjallojokull ash cloud of 2010 as an 'act of God' affecting air traffic limited the potential for institutional blame attribution as the public generally accepted that it was no-one's responsibility to prevent the event which arose from 'natural' and 'stochastic' factors. Seizing upon the media framing of the event as such, the UK health authorities were able to *not* take extensive precautionary measures to address possibility of significant health harms – a blame avoidance strategy that they had been unable to pursue with other environmental incidents such as Deepwater Horizon (ibid). A similar phenomenon exists with climate change issues whereby some governments have been able to assert these are 'natural' events which cannot be controlled by humans, obviating the need to undertake mitigative or adaptive actions (Howlett 2014).

Changes in larger-scale political paradigms – providing the context in which a particular issue is framed – also can play a key role in affecting public perceptions and judgments and hence blame avoidance and credit claiming strategies. Butler and Pidgeon (2011), for example, describe a shift in UK policy paradigms from 'flood defence' constituting the deployment of structural engineering techniques against flooding as a 'natural hazard' to 'flood risk management policy' constituting the holistic management of flood as a 'risk' with anthropogenic aspects such as land-use playing a role in increasing flood risk. This shift also represented a shift in responsibility from the

government to private citizens in terms of managing the incidence and impact of floods. Citizens became 'positioned as active individuals responsible for knowing and mitigating their own flood risk' (544) – ultimately redefining the public perception of flood policy as one which involved significant personal responsibility at the neighbourhood and household level; while reducing credit claiming opportunities, such a device also shielded public officers from blame in such situations.

Conclusion: Framing Blame as Legitimacy Rather than Risk

The first goal of this paper was to develop a coherent set of mechanisms linking blame avoidance and credit claiming. It did so by constructing a framework which conjoins acts of credit claiming and blame avoidance as a part of a coherent quest for legitimacy on the part of policy-makers, rather than as part of a simple utility calculation linked to public policy decision-making.

Viewed from the lens of legitimacy, both credit and blame have a common denominator. This lens of legitimacy informs other recent work such as Hood's more recent efforts to explain the interaction between policy failure and the career prospects of politicians and civil servants (Hood 2011). Such interactions are a function of "intentionality" and "avoidability" as well as emotions and cognitive biases of the public – that is subjective perception. For Hood, the risk of policy failure, and thus the tendency to ascribe blame, is greater when a failure is perceived by the public to be avoidable. That is, a government is to be blamed for a poor outcome when it is *reckless* as to the probability of such an outcome manifesting. Hood sees this an issue of legitimacy "from an electoral or legitimacy standpoint, as long as a problem has low public visibility and low scope or range of impact, despite its potential or actual seriousness, such a problem

does not necessarily require any government ameliorative or corrective action in order for a government to escape blame for failing to deal with it (Hood 2011).[1]

The paper's second aim was to clarify the relationship between the characteristics of certain policies and the likelihood that a particular blame avoidance or credit claiming strategy would be employed. Several observations can be made based on this point. First, as we have seen, blame avoidance makes certain types of policy responses more likely than others in specific instances such as dealing with policy innovations, while in others a finer balancing of credit and blame may occur. For instance, a government which fears the negative short-term costs of fighting climate change might want to support those who question the scientific evidence for global warming.

If blame and credit are viewed as separate motivations, and policy choice as a self-regarding political decision, then policy makers may choose that which give them the greatest credit from good policies, or the least blame for policy failures. If, however, blame and credit are viewed as a conceptual whole, the concepts of blame and credit then are part of a larger understanding of how governments seek to retain their legitimacy, rather than gain blame or credit *per se*. That is, rather than accumulating or avoiding blame or credit serving as end goals, they should be viewed as important considerations only insofar as they impact the legitimacy of the policy.

The third area of enquiry was in terms of better understanding the dynamics of blame avoidance and the processes behind shifts in strategies of blame avoidance and credit claiming. Approaching the question through the lens of the blame-credit nexus as a matter of legitimacy rather than risk assessment, helped clarify these dynamics. The

typology of blame developed here us to move beyond blame and credit as fundamental building blocks of bureaucratic motivation.

Looking at blame and credit as a part of a quest for legitimacy allows us to make room for these normative incentives as part of decision making by bureaucrats. Beyond blame avoidance and credit claiming, there are other motivations including physiological motivations (Andreoni, 1989, Ledyard, 1994), need for encouragement (Coleman 1988), or enhanced reputation (Coleman 1988), deontological imperatives such as honor, (Ullmann-Margalit, 1977), duty (Knack, 1992), or internalised norms (Coleman 1987), public spiritedness (Mansbridge, 1994), and moral duty (Etzioni, 1988) which rely on some form of reasoning beyond a blame-credit maximizing strategy. How these other-regarding motivations for decision marking interact with external imperatives such as social sanctions (Knack 1992), third-party sanctions (Bendor and Mookherjee, 1990), and externally-sanctioned norms (Coleman, 1987) and affect perceptions of blame and credit can be the subject of future work.

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