7 *Mapping the Influence of Issue Characteristics*

This chapter assesses how different combinations of issue characteristics influence the blame game interactions between opponents and incumbents. It analyzes and compares blame game interactions in light of distant-salient, proximate-nonsalient, and distant-nonsalient policy controversies. Each of the following three sections includes comparisons of three in-depth cases and a test case exhibiting a similar configuration of issue characteristics to verify and refine the results obtained from the comparisons. As outlined in Section 1.4, the three test cases are situated in the US political system to generate maximum variation on the explanatory factors that are not currently in the comparative focus. This arrangement enhances the generalizability of the findings. The chapter concludes with a comparison across controversy types.

7.1 Distant-Salient Blame Games

I first examine how opponents and incumbents reacted to and tried to work with public feedback to distant-salient controversies in order to reach their goals during blame games. As shown in the in-depth case studies in Chapters 3–5, public feedback to the CSA controversy, the NSU controversy, and the CARLOS controversy was strong and mainly based on moral considerations. I expected that strong public feedback to a distant-salient controversy would prompt opponents to heavily invest in blame generation and to attempt to damage incumbents on moral grounds. Incumbents, in turn, were expected to take the controversy very seriously and to confront it by engaging in blame deflection and symbolic activism.

Opponent Behavior in Response to Distant-Salient Controversies

Opponents' public statements in the distant-salient CSA, NSU, and CARLOS cases share interesting similarities. They leverage emotions

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in order to attract the public's attention and to simultaneously create moral pressure so that incumbents take action. By referring to the intolerable fate of children and lone parents under the current policy scheme (CSA), accusing the government of failing to protect migrants and their families (NSU), or portraying juvenile crime as a rampant problem that threatens public security (CARLOS), opponents alerted the public of the existence of a severe problem that required their attention and moral concern. The emotions that opponents leveraged for this purpose were either positive or negative, depending on the connotation of the policy target population (Schneider & Ingram, 1993). Lone parents and their children and the families of victims were portrayed to be suffering and in desperate need of help while juvenile offenders were portrayed as an undeserving target group in need of harsher punishment.

At the same time, opponents argued that political incumbents had a moral responsibility to address the controversy. By equating political responsibility with moral responsibility, opponents sought to establish a moral connection between incumbents and the controversy (Goodhart, 2017). In the CSA case, opponents repeatedly accused the Blair government of failing families and children and claimed that the latter would suffer if the Blair government continued to leave the controversy unaddressed. In the NSU case, opponents repeatedly argued that political responsibility needed to be assumed out of respect for victims and their families. In the CARLOS case, opponents claimed that tolerating a soft, 'leftish' legal practice violated generally accepted norms of justice.

During the blame games, opponents frequently attempted to debunk the (usually numerous) ad hoc measures that incumbents introduced in response to a controversy as insufficient, reputation-driven activism, presenting this as proof that incumbents did not live up to their moral responsibility to address the controversy. Opponents in the CSA case criticized incumbents for only announcing gimmicks and reviews and called the Blair government's reform plans for the child maintenance system a huge disappointment to families. Opponents in the NSU case accused incumbents of not being fully committed to the investigations. The government only acted by founding ever new and obscure commissions. In the CARLOS case, opponents criticized the executive's ad hoc measures to improve control over youth advocates as too lax, and they claimed that investigations into the therapy setting for 'Carlos' were insufficient. Overall, there is clear and abundant evidence that

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opponents worked with the salience of a controversy to attract the attention of the public and to damage incumbents on moral grounds. However, only in the CARLOS case is there concrete evidence that opponents also systematically exploited the wider public's distance to the controversy by portraying youth crime as a much bigger problem than it actually was in Switzerland. In the other two cases, it was simply difficult for opponents to exaggerate the salience of the controversy.

A look at the amount of blame opponents generated in the three blame games suggests that the distance and the salience of the respective controversies does not fully account for this parameter of opponent behavior. While opponents in the CARLOS case heavily engaged in blame generation, the other two cases provide a picture that is less clear. In the CSA case, the Tories did not initially invest much in blame generation because lone mothers were not an important voter group for them and because they had been involved in the setup of the flawed child maintenance system. In the NSU case, the SPD kept relatively quiet because some of the murders had happened while it had been in the government and because the severity of the controversy prevented it from exploiting the controversy too visibly. Hence, other factors must be considered to explain the amount of blaming that opponents undertake during a blame game.

Incumbent Behavior in Response to Distant-Salient Controversies

In the CSA, NSU, and CARLOS cases, political incumbents were eager to acknowledge the existence of a problem and expressed their willingness to take the problem seriously. In their public statements, they conveyed the idea that they were in emotional harmony with citizens. Depending on the dominant feeling in society and the dominant attitude toward the policy target population, they exhibited either a caring or an angry attitude. In the CSA case, political incumbents never downplayed the adverse impact of the child maintenance system on lone mothers and their children. Instead, they commiserated with them and repeatedly expressed their indignation toward 'errant fathers' who did not pay maintenance for their children. In the NSU case, the government expressed its bewilderment at the terror acts, apologized to the victims' families, and promised to learn from the failure of the investigation. In the CARLOS case, the minister of justice anxiously cultivated his image as a strongman willing to be tough on juvenile offenders and on the

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youth advocates who coddled them. Just as opponents flexibly leveraged either negative or positive emotions, incumbents were eager to match their attitude toward the controversy to the dominant feeling in society.

To lend weight to their 'attitude reports', incumbents reassured the public that they had the controversy under control and that they would do everything in their power to properly address it. In the CSA case, the government portrayed its reform plans as a radical shake-up of the flawed child maintenance system. Incumbents in the NSU case repeatedly confirmed their interest in the inquiry into the investigation failure and ensured their continuing commitment to comprehensively reforming the investigation apparatus. The incumbent in the CARLOS case also adopted a raft of ad hoc measures to keep 'freewheeling' youth advocates in check.

A look at the presentational strategies incumbents adopt in light of a distant-salient controversy reveals that blame deflection is the order of the day while reframing attempts are almost invisible. In all three cases, political incumbents repeatedly shifted blame downward onto the administrative level or onto the previous government. There are only limited reframing attempts in the CSA case where incumbents cautiously emphasized the performance improvements brought about by the reforms, and in the CARLOS case, where incumbents only lightly defended the therapy setting for Carlos. The especially strong evidence in the CARLOS case that incumbents had pondered the use of a reframing strategy but then opted against it because they considered that the controversy was not 'communicable' suggests that incumbents do not dare to reframe distant-salient controversies. This is an interesting finding given that one could expect that the distance of the controversy to the wider public would offer greater reframing possibilities. Instead, it seems that during a blame game in which a salient issue is processed, incumbents do not want to stand on the wrong side of the issue. Overall, incumbents have a surprisingly similar strategy profile across the three cases, which is firmly in line with the theoretical expectations. Incumbents take a distant-salient controversy very seriously and confront it by engaging in activism and blame deflection.

Test Case: Veterans Health Administration Operation Controversy

In order to refine our understanding of how blame game actors react to and work with this controversy type, the following section tests these

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findings against a fourth case that is also distant-salient. The Veterans Health Administration Operation (VHA) controversy is about poor care standards at a veteran hospital, which led to a blame game for the Obama administration in 2014.

Policy Struggle

The VHA controversy became known nationally in April 2014, when CNN reported on practices to hide long wait times for veteran patients at a hospital in Phoenix. The CNN report suggested that these practices could have led to up to forty veterans dying while waiting for care. The controversy had already simmered in the local media for some time, but the controversy was only catapulted onto the national agenda, where both quality papers and tabloids intensively and emotionally covered it, following the CNN report.[1] Republicans quickly used the controversy as an occasion to attack the Obama administration for its 'big government' approach and Obama's overt inability to "properly manage the leviathan government that he helped create."[2]

Blame Game Interactions

In reaction to the CNN report, Republicans began to assign blame to the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and its secretary, Eric Shinseki. Some Republicans urged the VA secretary to resign early on and criticized the department for stonewalling.[3] When the VA secretary announced the resignations of local VA officials and an inquiry into the matter led by the inspector general, Republicans condemned this as an insufficient reaction to a serious problem. Shinseki had portrayed an unrelated resignation of a VA official as a reaction to the controversy – a move Republicans, after they had found out about the true background of the resignation, called "the pinnacle of disingenuous political doublespeak."[4] They claimed that 'true' accountability and an independent inquiry were needed instead. Since President Obama did not immediately become personally involved but rather let his VA secretary initially do the crisis management, Republicans criticized him for not reacting quickly enough and for taking the controversy too lightly.[5]

The VA secretary immediately reacted to the allegations by calling them "absolutely unacceptable," if true.[6] He declared that he was taking the controversy very seriously, announced the launch of an inquiry led by the inspector general, and suspended several local

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officials.[7] However, Shinseki also asked for time to examine the allegations in detail and pointed to the overall good quality of veteran care.[8] As Republicans consistently maintained the blame pressure and increasingly focused on Obama, the latter was also forced to react to the controversy. The president sent one of his personal advisers to help investigate the practices at the Phoenix hospital and to find the underlying cause of the allegations. Obama took a tough stance on the controversy, proclaiming that he was "madder than hell" about what had happened.[9] He also justified his delayed reaction by arguing that he had only learned about the controversy from the national media. When on May 28 the inspector general published the first inquiry results that confirmed widespread manipulations of waiting lists at the Phoenix hospital, Obama finally decided, amid widespread calls from Republicans, to dismiss the VA secretary.

Consequences of the Blame Game

After Shinseki's resignation, opponents and the administration were both eager to express their determination to further evaluate the controversy and to propose solutions. Congress finally agreed on a huge increase in funding to overhaul the VA's health care system, passed new legislation expanding veterans' access to care, and eased the ability to fire VA executives.[10]

Test of Preliminary Findings and Summary

In the remainder of this section, I assess whether opponent and incumbent behavior in the blame game surrounding the VHA controversy is in line with the behavioral patterns observed in the in-depth cases.

Opponent Behavior

In their intensive and consistent blame attacks on the VA secretary, and the Obama administration as a whole, opponents relied heavily on the use of emotions to attract the attention of the public. They repeatedly spoke of "our" veterans, whom "we, as a country," had let down. According to opponents, this was a controversy that concerned everyone, as there exists a collective duty to care for those who fought and sacrificed for the nation. Opponents took the same position to create moral pressure for the government to address the controversy. They equated political with moral responsibility by arguing that the

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government had a "sacred obligation" to care for veterans. By not providing adequate and timely care for veterans, the government had violated a "solemn vow."[11]

One can also discern clear attempts by opponents to debunk the government's crisis management as reputation-driven activism. The call for an independent inquiry, the accusation of stonewalling, or the labeling of the unrelated resignation of a top official as a form of "semantic hair splitting," are clear assertions by opponents that the government did not live up to its moral responsibility. How much emphasis opponents put on portraying the government as uncommitted and aloof can also be read from their criticism of Obama's relatively late personal intervention.[12] Overall, in this blame game, one can observe opponent behavior that is strongly in line with the predictions derived from the three in-depth cases.

Incumbent Behavior

A similar picture emerges when validating the predictions regarding incumbent behavior. In line with the other distant-salient cases, the VA secretary did not wait long to position himself in regard to the controversy and expressed a caring attitude. Both the VA secretary, and later the president, repeatedly claimed that they took the controversy very seriously. They were both eager to express a compassionate attitude toward veterans and outdid each other in expressing their anger about waiting time manipulations. While the VA secretary reported that the allegations made him "mad as hell," the president proclaimed to be "madder than hell."[13] How important it was for incumbents to signal a caring attitude during the VHA controversy blame game can also be gleaned from the mocking of the VA secretary by Comedy Central's Jon Stewart. Stewart suggested that the VA secretary was not truly emotionally involved in the issue, telling him that "your 'mad as hell' face looks a lot like your, 'Oh, we're out of orange juice face.'"[14] To substantiate its commitment, the government also adopted a raft of ad hoc measures, such as the commissioning of several inquiries, repeated firings of VA officials, and announcements that it would provide affected veterans with immediate care.

Another similarity in incumbents' strategy profile is their overt use of blame deflection. It is surprising, however, that incumbents also carefully engaged in reframing. The VA secretary prudently emphasized the high overall satisfaction with veteran care and the previous achievements under the Obama administration in that policy area. Hence, we

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must nuance the finding that incumbents, confronted with a distant-salient controversy, never brace themselves against blame but only seek refuge in blame deflection. A look at the specific reframing activities in the VHA case, and also at the careful reframing attempts in the CSA and CARLOS cases, suggests that incumbents can apply some reframing activities while they avoid others. Namely, incumbents may try to put a distant-salient controversy into perspective by shifting public attention toward positive achievements or developments in related areas, or by announcing that they will wait with their final verdict about a controversy.[15] However, what incumbents do not do when confronted with a distant-salient controversy is play it down or take it lightly. Overall, in regard to incumbent behavior, one can state that the predictions derived from the in-depth case studies are largely corroborated by the president and his secretary's behavior during the VHA controversy.

Summary

Opponents who generate blame for a distant-salient controversy work with emotions in order to moralize the controversy and put political incumbents under pressure. They are eager to portray incumbents' responses to a controversy as morally inadequate. Incumbents, in turn, when confronted with a distant-salient controversy, quickly position themselves, assume an attitude that matches the dominant feeling in society, and adopt various ad hoc measures to demonstrate activism. They also engage in blame deflection and only carefully reframe the controversy.

7.2 Proximate-Nonsalient Blame Games

This section seeks to answer how opponents and incumbents reacted to and tried to work with public feedback to proximate-nonsalient controversies. As shown in the in-depth case studies, there was moderate public feedback to the METRONET, BER, and TAX controversies. I formulated the expectation that moderate public feedback to a proximate-nonsalient controversy would prompt opponents to invest considerably in blame generation and to try to activate considerations of self-interest among the wider public. Moreover, I expected that incumbents would take a proximate-nonsalient controversy seriously and mainly address it by adopting reframing strategies and forms of activism.

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Opponent Behavior in Response to Proximate-Nonsalient Controversies

A comparison of opponents' public statements in the three cases suggests that proximate-nonsalient controversies largely deprive opponents of the opportunity to leverage emotions to attract the attention of the public and to put moral pressure on incumbents. To be sure, opponents made use of deft words to call attention to a controversy, calling it either a 'disaster', a 'fiasco', a 'scandal', a 'debacle', or a 'scam'. However, it is not necessarily clear from the outset whether or not a proximate-nonsalient policy controversy will actually constitute a venerable political scandal. In the METRONET case, for instance, it was far from obvious that the failure of the PPP constituted a scandal. Opponents had to first establish this as a fact during the controversy by, among other things, making the incumbent publicly admit that the whole issue was a scandal. This is in marked difference to a distant-salient controversy, whose severity opponents need not establish in the first place but can take for granted during the blame game.

The cases reveal an interesting strategy of how opponents attempt to overcome this disadvantage. Instead of leveraging emotions, they leverage the controversy's proximity to the public in order to convince it that the controversy is relevant to them and to simultaneously draw incumbents into the blame game. In the METRONET case, opponents promised the public that they would try everything in their power to inhibit the passing of financial losses onto passengers in the form of price hikes or through job or pension losses. Moreover, they condemned the huge bill "forced upon Londoners." Similarly, in the BER case, opponents emphasized the massive impact of the delayed and over-expensive airport project on the cash-strapped household of the city of Berlin. In the TAX case, opponents also repeatedly claimed that the company tax breaks had been made on the back of the hard-working and tax-paying public. These claims of personal relevance portrayed citizens as economic actors who suffered material losses from a controversy. According to this line of argumentation, citizens are forced to pay for the controversy through higher taxes or prices for services, job or pension losses, or endure poor public services in other areas that can no longer be financed.

Claims of personal relevance formed by opponents can also take a different form. In the three cases, opponents also emphasized that the actions of incumbents had deprived citizens of the rights that they

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are entitled to as members of a democratic political system. In the METRONET case, opponents tried to turn the flawed PPP into a safety issue by connecting it to an increase in the number of tube accidents, arguing that the government had sacrificed passenger safety in favor of efficiency. In the BER case, opponents argued that incumbents and their behavior with regard to the airport had humiliated the citizens of Berlin. Moreover, in the TAX case, opponents argued that incumbents had betrayed Swiss citizens by not properly informing them about the implications of the tax reform and that incumbents would favor company interests over citizen interests. By emphasizing a betrayal aspect, opponents attempted to inject an element of unfairness into their respective blame game, thus bringing an inherently nonsalient controversy closer to a salient one.

While claims of personal relevance constitute a different path through which opponents try to attract the attention of the wider public and put pressure on incumbents, they also entail a specific way to place policy goals on the agenda. Unlike in the distant-salient cases, where opponents argued that incumbents had a moral responsibility to change policy, opponents wrapped their policy goal(s) in problem-centered claims. They urged incumbents to immediately limit or atone for the damage revealed by the controversy by renationalizing operations to guarantee safe and reliable services (METRONET), by compensating for the financial losses of affected companies and citizens (BER), or by limiting tax losses by making amendments to the reforms (TAX).

Overall, there is strong evidence that opponents make claims of personal relevance when generating blame for a proximate-nonsalient controversy. The same cannot be said for the amount of blame generation. While there is considerable blame generation in the BER and TAX cases, the METRONET case does not follow this pattern. The Tories in particular did not invest much in blame generation because they were not categorically against PPPs. As for distant-salient controversies, issue characteristics alone cannot account for the amount of blame generated by opponents.

Incumbent Behavior in Response to Proximate-Nonsalient Controversies

In the three in-depth cases regarding proximate-nonsalient controversies, incumbents admitted to the existence of a serious problem and

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signaled their willingness to address it. However, and much unlike distant-salient blame games, incumbents exhibited a confident stance when addressing a proximate-nonsalient controversy. In the METRONET case, the government rejected criticism of its PPP policy, confidently claimed that it would find a new buyer of Metronet's debts, and did not shy away from attracting further criticism by awarding the owners of Metronet with new PPP contracts, despite earlier statements to the contrary. In the BER case, we can also observe the peculiar mix of admitting the existence of a problem and of confidently addressing it. Moreover, in the TAX case, the government firmly maintained its point against a repetition of the tax reform referendum due to the importance of legal certainty for companies and, in the early phases of the blame game, it also rejected amendments to the reforms. We can clearly observe that the incumbents in the three cases did not adopt an attitude that was in line with the dominant feeling in society. Rather, they dared to impose their will and view on the controversies.

This confident stance also manifested itself in moderate levels of activism during the blame games. Contrary to what I expected, the cases do not provide clear evidence that incumbents engaged in activism to quickly eliminate the negative consequences emanating from a proximate controversy. In the METRONET case, for example, incumbents were exonerated by promising to learn from the controversy. In the TAX case, the Federal Council could have done more at the beginning of the blame game to signal its responsiveness to the claims of opponents but did not. Three interrelated factors can account for a lack of activism on the part of incumbents. First, there may be generally less pressure to act during a nonsalient controversy than during a salient one. Second, the ample use of reframing, which also serves to defend the policy contested by opponents (see later), may allow incumbents to reduce their substantive responses to the controversy. And third, the degree to which incumbents must accommodate opponents with their policy demands also depends on various institutional factors. Overall, I must qualify the expectation that incumbents exhibit high degrees of activism toward proximate-nonsalient controversies under all conditions.

With regard to presentational strategies, one can discern that incumbents deflected blame onto various entities such as private companies (METRONET and BER), administrative actors (BER), or onto parliament (TAX). Moreover, incumbents intensively engaged in reframing. In marked contrast to distant-salient blame games, the reframing

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activities observed in the cases were not only intended to distract from the controversy, or put it into a larger problem context. Instead, they targeted the controversy itself, that is, incumbents explicitly tried to dispel or relativize the claims of personal relevance that had been made by opponents. On the one hand, incumbents downplayed the material losses emphasized by opponents. On the other hand, they emphasized the multiple benefits a policy granted despite the problem(s) exposed by the controversy. In the METRONET case, incumbents defended PPPs and argued that they presented good value for money. In the BER case, the mayor repeatedly argued that the delays and extra costs for the airport would be offset by positive economic effects. And in the TAX case, the Federal Council and the support camp argued that tax losses were much smaller than portrayed by opponents and that the public would instead benefit from rising corporate tax income and the creation of new jobs. This evidence suggests that, unlike in distant-salient cases, incumbents contend with opponents over what a controversy – or the policy it stands for – means to the public as a whole. Overall, one can conclude that incumbents take a proximate-nonsalient controversy seriously but, at the same time, exhibit a confident stance toward it. They concentrate on contesting opponents' claims of personal relevance by reframing the policy controversy and its implications.

Test Case: Flu Vaccine Provision Controversy (FLU)

In the following, I test the earlier findings against a fourth proximate-nonsalient case to obtain a more definitive picture of how blame game actors react to and work with this controversy type. The Flu Vaccine Provision (FLU) Controversy is about a vaccine shortage in the USA, which developed into a blame game for the Bush administration before the 2004 presidential elections.

Policy Struggle

The FLU controversy began on October 6, 2004, when the US Department of Health and Human Services announced that Chiron, an American biotech company, and one of its two major vaccine suppliers, would be unable to supply flu shots due to contamination problems in one of its factories in Liverpool, UK. Since the authorities could not adequately compensate for this loss of production by buying from other providers, the contamination problems resulted in

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a massive shortfall of the vaccine for the 2004–2005 influenza season. Experts quickly furnished opponents with a prime occasion for blaming the government for an 'utterly predictable' public health fiasco. They argued that a frail system, based on too few suppliers, was a main reason for the shortage. Experts called for a more diversified supplier base and, for this purpose, asked the government to take measures to encourage more companies to stay in the vaccine market.[16] Another bone of contention was that the Food and Drug Administration, an agency of the Department of Health and Human Services, had been aware of the production problems at Chiron's Liverpool plant for at least a month before the announcement. Instead of preparing for the worst case, the Food and Drug Administration had trusted Chiron's claim that the problems could be fixed in time and would not significantly affect the vaccine supply.[17] Both the undiversified supplier base and the Food and Drug Administration's slow reaction to the production problems provided fertile ground for Democrats to blame the Bush administration before the November 2004 presidential elections.

Blame Game Interactions

The main opponent in this blame game, the Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry, used the vaccine shortage as a symbol for President Bush's "dangerous indifference" to health care questions and accused him of being "out of touch with people's daily lives."[18] He blamed the Bush administration for not reacting in time and for acting surprised instead of telling the truth early on. Moreover, Kerry hinted at the government's general inability to protect US citizens from threats, rhetorically asking "If you can't plan to have enough of that vaccine, what are they doing with respect to other things that could potentially hurt America in terms of bioterrorism, chemical terrorism, other kinds of things?"[19] Other Democrats, among them Edward Kennedy from Massachusetts, stressed that citizens deserved to know the truth about the Food and Drug Administration's actions and responsibility with regard to the vaccine shortage. Kennedy in particular criticized that the government was putting "a happy face on a disaster."[20]

The Bush administration quickly reacted to the shortage, and the Department of Health and Human Services' secretary called Chiron's announcement disappointing news that meant "a serious challenge to our vaccine supply for the upcoming season."[21] The

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secretary confessed that US authorities had been surprised by the extent of Chiron's production problems. When questioned about the Food and Drug Administration's actions during the controversy, its acting commissioner strongly rejected criticism, arguing that "We followed standard procedures and this is the way we have always done it."[22] President Bush also claimed that "We took the right action."[23] The Bush administration not only defended the actions of the Food and Drug Administration but went further by attacking the Kerry camp for "incredible hypocrisy" and the application of scare tactics.[24] It contested Kerry's problem analysis, arguing instead that a broken medical malpractice liability system, for which Democrats were responsible, lay at the root of the vaccine shortage. The Bush administration was also eager to spread optimism and show its control of the controversy. It repeatedly emphasized that the shortage "is not a crisis" and that existing flu shots would be "enough to keep America safe."[25] Moreover, Bush claimed that flu shots could be imported from Canada and Germany to increase supply. During the whole blame game, the Bush administration invested a great deal into effective crisis management, which was supplied and coordinated by its Centers for Disease Control. The latter drew up a plan to effectively and fairly distribute the remaining flu shots to priority citizens, explored the possibility of splitting doses to vaccinate more people, and exhibited a tough stance on price gougers.[26]

Consequences of the Blame Game

After the elections, investigations by Congress, the Department of Health and Human Services, and the Justice Department, as well as skirmishes between Democrats and the Food and Drug Administration, went on for a while. Aided by a relatively mild flu season, the controversy never regained the public attention it had received prior to the elections.[27] In the end, it led neither to resignations nor to immediate policy consequences.

Test of Preliminary Findings and Summary

In the following, I test whether opponent and incumbent behavior in the blame game surrounding the FLU controversy is in line with the behavioral patterns observed in the in-depth cases.

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Opponent Behavior

One clearly sees that opponents primarily tried to exploit the proximity of the FLU controversy to attract the attention of the public and to put pressure on incumbents. Opponents claimed that the Bush administration had lied to the public about the content and amount of information it possessed about vaccine production problems and that the Bush administration was unable to protect citizens from biological threats. These claims sent a clear message of personal relevance to citizens and suggested that citizens had been deprived of their right to be properly informed about an important issue and of the right to feel secure. A radio advertisement from the Kerry campaign nicely illustrates how opponents aimed to catch the attention of the wider public by making claims of personal relevance: "If you're an elderly man or woman, if you're a young child, if you're a pregnant woman, George Bush and the Republicans have this to say on health care: Don't get sick."[28] *The New York Times* also grasped how much the Democrats emphasized proximity during this controversy, remarking that "the Fear Room at Kerry campaign headquarters is on a hair trigger to turn any breaking news into a personal threat."[29]

A noteworthy difference to the previously analyzed cases is that the opponents in this blame game did not propose concrete policy proposals that would correct the 'rights violations' by incumbents. Instead, opponents predominantly used the controversy as a symbol for bad health care performance by the government and as an occasion to damage the government before the elections. This suggests that opponents may not always have an interest in tying their policy requests to claims of personal relevance. Overall, in this blame game, one can observe opponent behavior that is largely in line with the predictions derived from the in-depth cases.

Incumbent Behavior

The FLU case also allows me to corroborate several of the predictions relating to incumbent behavior. As in the in-depth cases, incumbents quickly acknowledged the existence of a problem and signaled their commitment to address it. In doing so, incumbents exhibited a very confident stance. Both public officials and politicians strongly defended their actions. Moreover, they contested the 'problem analysis' presented by opponents and confidently attacked them for being hypocritical and for scaring citizens.

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While there are careful and rather indirect blame deflection attempts onto Chiron and the British authorities that had imposed a production ban on Chiron's Liverpool factory, incumbents concentrated more on reframing the controversy. The Bush administration repeatedly emphasized that it had the vaccine shortage under control, that the shortage was not a crisis, and expressed its optimism that the number of flu shots could be increased by splitting doses and buying shots from other countries. When defending the crisis management of his administration during a presidential debate, President Bush left the Food and Drug Administration, which was the agency most criticized by opponents, completely unmentioned while concentrating on the mostly successful crisis management by the Centers for Disease Control. Finally, the Bush camp also emphasized that it had invested much more into influenza preparedness than previous Democratic administrations. Taken together, these reframing attempts clearly intended to qualify the claims of personal relevance made by opponents. According to incumbents, the government was able to provide security, had never lied to citizens, and had acted correctly.

When it comes to substantive responses, there is no evidence that the government deliberately remained inactive. Instead, it seems that the government did everything possible to address the controversy. Hence, I cannot verify the claim that the increased use of reframing allows incumbents to reduce their substantive efforts to address a controversy. Overall, I conclude that incumbent behavior is largely in line with the predictions derived from the in-depth cases.

Summary

The analysis makes me conclude that opponents who blame incumbents for a proximate-nonsalient controversy mainly rely on claims of personal relevance to attract the attention of the public and to put pressure on incumbents. Incumbents having to address a proximate-nonsalient controversy admit the existence of a significant problem and signal their willingness to address it. However, in doing so, they exhibit a confident stance, defending their actions and strongly engaging in reframing activities.

7.3 Distant-Nonsalient Blame Games

In this section, I examine whether and how the actors playing a blame game tried to work with and reacted to public feedback to distant-

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nonsalient controversies. As shown in the in-depth case studies, public feedback to the DOME, DRONE, and EXPO controversies was weak. Accordingly, I formulated the expectation that opponents would not invest much in blame generation on the occasion of a distant-nonsalient controversy. I also expected that incumbents would not take a distant-nonsalient controversy very seriously and would only half-heartedly engage in blame management.

Opponent Behavior in Response to Distant-Nonsalient Controversies

The blame-generation attempts of opponents in the three distant-nonsalient blame games share two important characteristics: the absence of emotions and convincing claims of personal relevance. While opponents employed harsh words like 'scandal' (DOME), 'financial fiasco' (DRONE), or 'moneysink' (EXPO) to attract the attention of the public, they could not do much more than this. In the DOME case, opponents could only criticize the government for money waste. However, the extra money that the government put into the exposition was relatively modest and thus did not lend itself to convincing claims of personal relevance. Opponents could only couch their attacks in truisms like 'When you put your money on the wrong horse, you stop betting on it.' In the DRONE case, opponents criticized the failed procurement project in a routinized way, arguing that the government continued a sad tradition of the German military. In the EXPO case, attacks by opponents were never harsh and, during later phases of the blame game, when the government brought ever new financing requests, became overtly cynical. Taken together, the public statements suggest that in the absence of opportunities to leverage powerful emotions or to make convincing claims of personal relevance, opponents can only use deft but eventually empty words to attract the attention of the public and to put pressure on incumbents.

While these observations are in line with theoretical expectations, the DOME and DRONE cases provide further, indirect, evidence that distant-nonsalient controversies are far from ideal for blame-generation purposes. In both cases, opponents were quick to concentrate their attacks on the personal involvement of incumbents once they were provided an opportunity to do so. In the DOME case, opponents urged the Millennium minister to resign because he had allegedly

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ignored warnings about the Dome's solvency. Similarly, after the opponents in the DRONE case had seen a chance to personalize the controversy by convicting the minister of personal wrongdoings, they stepped up their blame-generation efforts and personally attacked the minister. At the same time, however, the controversy as such faded into the background. Opponents had completely organized the blame game around the question of what the minister had known at what time and whether this was a reason to resign. While this confirms the insight gained from the other controversy categories that the amount of blame generation does not solely depend on issue characteristics, it also suggests that opponents are aware of the apparent unfruitfulness of distant-nonsalient controversies for blame-generation purposes. In sum, the evidence suggests that opponents do not invest much in blame generation and merely pay lip service to a distant-nonsalient controversy in the absence of factors that could facilitate the personal involvement of incumbents.

Incumbent Behavior in Response to Distant-Nonsalient Controversies

In the three in-depth case studies, incumbents took their time to react to and position themselves toward the controversy. In the DRONE case, the minister remained very passive until he was accused of personal wrongdoings. He waited for quite some time to inform parliament about the cancellation of the procurement of the drones, ignored initial criticism, and barely addressed the controversy in a parliamentary debate. Similarly, in the EXPO case, the Federal Council ignored the management problems at the Verein for quite a while until all major parties prompted it to assume political responsibility. Only in the DOME case, where the government was directly involved in the policy issue right from the start, was it very difficult to remain passive.

One can also discern that as soon as the controversies could not be ignored any longer, incumbents confidently addressed them. In the DOME case, Blair and his minister admitted that mistakes had been made in the planning of the exposition but never apologized for them. Instead, they attacked the media for bashing the Dome. In the DRONE case, the minister confidently addressed the controversy by promising information in the near future and defended the use of drones. After it had become clear that the allegations against him could not be

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substantiated, he once again exhibited a very confident stance. In the EXPO case, the incumbent even framed the controversy as a "salutory crisis" that finally allowed him to set things straight – a stance he could hardly afford in the case of a salient or proximate controversy. This evidence suggests that incumbents exhibit an even more confident stance toward distant-nonsalient controversies than toward proximate-nonsalient ones. Generously admitting mistakes, presenting oneself as the savior during a crisis for which one is ultimately responsible, or attacking the media for misrepresenting a controversy, are behavioral patterns that suggest that incumbents feel very safe during blame games about distant-nonsalient controversies. A sense of security helps to explain why the incumbents in the three cases did not do more than was absolutely necessary to address the controversies. In the DRONE case, for instance, the minister only promised ad hoc improvements after opponents began to accuse him of lying. Likewise, in the EXPO case, the government only became active after all major parties pressed for stronger political involvement at the Verein.

With regard to presentational strategies, the cases suggest that incumbents, like during proximate-nonsalient blame games, occasionally deflect blame onto administrative actors or onto previous governments. However, they predominantly relied on reframing strategies when addressing a distant-nonsalient controversy. While incumbents in the DOME and EXPO cases defended the respective expositions against their critics, in the DRONE case, the minister defended the use of drones for military purposes. Incumbents obviously did not shy away from the discourse about a distant-nonsalient controversy. Moreover, their public statements show that incumbents have a freer hand in reframing a distant-nonsalient controversy because they do not need to dispel claims of personal relevance. In other words, their reframing attempts do not need to accommodate negative consequences for the wider public. Overall, one sees that incumbents combine a passive but very confident stance with ample reframing activities.

Test Case: Solyndra Loan Provision Controversy (SOLYNDRA)

In this section, I test the earlier findings against a fourth case from the distant-nonsalient category. This allows me to refine our understanding

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of how blame game actors react to and work with feedback to distant-nonsalient controversies. The SOLYNDRA controversy is about a solar panel manufacturer that defaulted on a US government loan in 2011. Republicans used the default to blame the Obama administration for its green energy policy.

Policy Struggle

In 2009, the Obama administration granted a US$535 million loan guarantee to Solyndra, a California-based solar panel manufacturer. The loan guarantee was granted as part of a recently extended loan guarantee program administered by the US Department of Energy. After taking office in February 2009, President Obama signed the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act into law. It provided for considerable investments into green energy to stimulate the economy in response to the economic crisis. Two years later, in late August 2011, Solyndra filed for bankruptcy.[30] For Republicans, the bankruptcy was a welcome event to criticize the Obama administration's green energy policy and to condemn its costly and futile interventions into the economy to create jobs. Republicans were very much tempted to tie Obama and his closest advisers to the controversy, as the president had visited Solyndra one year earlier and had portrayed the company as a "testament to American ingenuity and dynamism."[31]

Blame Game Interactions

After the bankruptcy announcement, Republicans began to frame Solyndra as a "model of poor government investment" and quickly came up with the allegation that the Department of Energy had only approved the loan because a wealthy donor to the Obama campaign was also an investor in Solyndra.[32] While these attacks suggested that this controversy was an instance of 'crony' capitalism right from the start, they initially targeted Obama's 'interventionist' stance in rather general terms rather than bluntly accusing his administration of corruption. Republicans, although emphasizing the loss of taxpayer money in times of fiscal stress, concentrated on portraying Obama as a 'failed venture capitalist'.[33] After e-mail releases began to suggest that the Department of Energy had fast-tracked loan guarantee reviews for political reasons, Republicans intensified their blaming to drive the controversy into a full-blown scandal. They pressed the Obama administration to suspend loan handouts to clean energy companies and

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stepped up their investigation efforts through committees, hoping to unequivocally show that the Obama administration had acted corruptly in the Solyndra case.[34]

In reacting to Republicans' allegations, the government adopted a clearly discernible strategy mix and followed it even after Republicans formulated clear-cut corruption allegations. President Obama, his advisers, and the Department of Energy secretary called the loan default an unfortunate event, but not a mistake, because occasional defaults were an unavoidable part of a risky and innovation-generating loan program. Accordingly, they refused to apologize for past actions.[35] The Obama administration also engaged in heavy reframing activities. It argued that Solyndra had already applied for a loan guarantee under the Bush administration and that the Obama administration had only finished the application procedure in a sound and legal way.[36] The Obama administration also stressed the fact that changing market conditions, especially the increased competition from China, had caused the bankruptcy of Solyndra. Moreover, it expressed optimism that part of the federal investment could still be recovered in the ensuing bankruptcy reorganization. Overall, the Obama administration heavily contested that the Solyndra loan default constituted a scandal at all. Consequently, it also did not accuse Solyndra of having done anything wrong.[37] Throughout the blame game, the Obama administration held on to the loan program. The Department of Energy even issued two large loan guarantees to solar companies only a few days after Solyndra's bankruptcy. Moreover, the administration announced its plan to hand out further US$9.2 billion in guarantees until the end of September 2011.[38]

Consequences of the Blame Game

Further e-mail releases in the course of investigations prompted the Republican House majority to drag the controversy on for some time.[39] However, as those e-mails did not allow Republicans to substantiate their corruption allegations, the blame game ended without producing noteworthy consequences. There were no resignations related to the controversy and the Obama administration announced that it intended to maintain its loan guarantee program unchanged.[40] *The New York Times* eventually remarked that the "circus of broad accusations" staged by the Republicans had not succeeded in inflating the controversy or in tarnishing the Obama administration.[41]

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Test of Preliminary Findings and Summary

In the remainder of this section, I assess whether opponent and incumbent behavior in the blame game surrounding the SOLYNDRA controversy is in line with the behavioral patterns observed in the three in-depth cases.

Opponent Behavior

By analyzing opponents' public statements, it is possible to discern a significant change in the level of blaming throughout the course of this blame game. While Republicans immediately blamed the Obama administration for unsuccessfully meddling in the economy, they only stepped up their blaming efforts when they got hold of e-mails that suggested that the Obama administration had acted corruptly in the Solyndra case. Also, media outlets duly noted that Republicans were "escalating political furor" and were "broadening their attacks" when the corruption issue had become salient.[42] Very similarly to the DRONE case, it was mainly the prospect of damaging Obama, or one of his closest advisers, and not the controversy itself that prompted Republicans to step up their blame-generation efforts.

It is also apparent that Republicans had difficulties leveraging emotions or personal relevance during this blame game. Picturing the president as a failed venture capitalist may constitute a scathing reproach, especially in the US context, but it hardly leverages emotions that attract the attention of the public. Also, the occasional indications from Republicans that the Obama administration had wasted US$0.5 billion of taxpayer money during times of fiscal stress rang hollow in the face of a loan program that was supposed to invest many times over into clean energy. This lack of leverage helps to explain why Republicans were eager to shift the debate from money waste and failed state interventionism to personal involvement and corruption.

Nevertheless, Republicans were not reluctant to blame the government, even before corruption allegations became salient. This suggests that distance and low salience alone cannot fully account for the amount of blaming in this case. For example, the Republicans' strong ideational opposition to state interventionism could account for their willingness to blame Democrats, even in the case of a distant-nonsalient controversy. Taken together, the blaming activities of opponents are mainly in line

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with those observed in the three in-depth cases, especially if one isolates the influence of the rather idiosyncratic corruption allegations.

Incumbent Behavior

Incumbents' public statements reveal a very consistent and clear strategy profile. Throughout the blame game, incumbents contested whether the loan default was a controversial event at all, refused to call the investment decision a mistake, and accordingly, did not apologize for it. Incumbents were also able to apply reframing strategies without deflecting blame onto others. This is a noteworthy finding, since the Obama administration could have blamed Solyndra for misleading the federal authorities or officials who had gotten into a predicament due to the e-mail releases. Instead, the Obama administration defended the loan decision made two years before, portrayed the default as an unfortunate, although normal, occurrence, and spread optimism that significant parts of the loan could eventually be recovered. Moreover, the administration calmly and firmly held on to its view that all procedural requirements had been met, that there had not been undue political meddling, and that corruption allegations were unsubstantiated. Finally, incumbents did not actively address the controversy, let alone give in to the demand of opponents to stop the loan guarantee program. Instead, incumbents kept issuing loans to solar companies and expressed their determination to continue with the loan guarantee program.

The only prediction that cannot be substantiated is that incumbents take their time when reacting to a distant-nonsalient controversy. When Republicans began their criticism, the Obama administration immediately retorted. Hence, I must qualify the prediction that the distance and low salience of a controversy alone can account for incumbents' reaction speed to the controversy. Overall, one can conclude that incumbent behavior is mostly in line with the predictions derived from the three in-depth cases.

Summary

The analysis suggests that 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 the reputation of incumbents. Distant-nonsalient controversies do not lend themselves to the leveraging of emotions or personal relevance. Incumbents

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that have to deal with distant-nonsalient controversies thus confidently confront opponents, reframe their attacks, and do not usually issue substantive responses. In the next section, I compare and summarize the results obtained from the analysis of the different combinations of issue characteristics on blame game interactions.

7.4 Issue Characteristics and Their Influence on Blame Game Interactions

The analyses and comparisons carried out in the nine in-depth cases and in the three test cases reveal that issue characteristics influence important parameters of opponent and incumbent behavior. While institutional factors influence the basic form of a blame game, provide gateways for and barriers to blame attacks, and determine the power distribution between opponents and incumbents, these contextual factors omit the question of what exactly blame game actors say and do to influence the public and attack the other side. In other words, the content of blame game interactions is left largely unexplained by institutional factors. The previous three sections show that issue characteristics fill this gap. Issue characteristics influence whether and how opponents can signal the severity of a controversy to the public and how they can put incumbents under pressure to meet their policy demands. Moreover, issue characteristics influence how incumbents position themselves with regard to a controversy and determine the strategy mix they employ to manage blame.

Opponent Behavior

Regardless of the controversy type, opponents abundantly use deft words to tag a controversy. Tags like 'terrible failure', 'huge scandal', or 'horrible shambles' belong to the same type of 'baseline rhetoric' that opponents adopt to attract the public's attention. The message opponents send by adopting this rhetoric is a simple one: "Hey, look, this is unlike routine political business, something is going terribly wrong here!" Another similarity across controversy types is that opponents attempt to kill two birds with one stone with their public statements during a blame game: They seek to attract the attention of the public and to put pressure on incumbents to enter a blame game and to address the underlying controversy. It is here where issue

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characteristics become decisive. Issue characteristics determine the ways in which opponents pursue these mutually reinforcing goals.

Attracting the Attention of the Public: Emotions, Personal Relevance, or Merely Deft Words

In the case of a distant-salient controversy, attracting the attention of the public is a relatively easy task for opponents. A salient controversy is inherently contentious and attracts the attention of the public as soon as it hears about it. On top of simply pointing the public to a distant-salient controversy, opponents usually fuel public feedback by stressing the emotional content of the controversy, like norm violations or suffering on the part of citizens. In the absence of salience, attracting public attention is more difficult. Opponents must then go the extra mile to try to convince the public that a controversy merits close attention. This is where proximity becomes relevant. Proximity allows opponents to approach citizens as deprived subjects. Opponents formulate claims of personal relevance that relate to material losses and/or to the violation of rights, such as the right to be properly informed by the government about certain issues or the right to enjoy protection from particular threats. In both distant-salient and proximate-nonsalient cases, political opponents are often joined by vocal social actors in their blame-generation efforts. This aspect lends additional weight and credibility to the blame-generation efforts of political opponents. In distant-nonsalient cases, on the contrary, political opponents have a hard time convincing the public that a controversy merits their attention. It is in these cases where the baseline rhetoric of deft words rings most hollow.

Putting Pressure on Incumbents: Moral Obligation, Debt Obligation, or Bad Job

The in-debt cases revealed that political systems exhibit various institutional factors that combine to form functionally equivalent blame barriers that protect incumbents. This is a complication opponents attempt to overcome by establishing a causal connection between the incumbent and the controversy. How opponents attempt to make this connection and whether or not they succeed, depends, to a significant degree, on issue characteristics. In the case of a distant-salient controversy, opponents primarily leverage emotions to tie incumbents to a controversy. The causal connection opponents strive to create takes

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the form of a moral obligation that incumbents must address. No matter how far away from the incumbent this controversy might be in institutional terms, as the politically responsible actor, the incumbent, must assume this responsibility by engaging with the controversy and eventually accepting its consequences. Accordingly, opponents frequently debunk incumbents' attempts to address a distant-salient controversy as a morally reprehensible form of reputation-driven activism. In sharp contrast to the latter, opponents present their policy demands as the morally adequate solution to the problems at the root of the controversy. In case of a proximate-nonsalient controversy, the causal connection opponents seek to establish takes the form of a debt obligation. Incumbents who 'betrayed' the public by depriving it of money, services, or democratic rights, should 'pay back' what they owe by meeting the policy demands of opponents. In the case of a distant-nonsalient controversy, opponents have difficulty establishing a causal connection between incumbents and the controversy since they can leverage neither emotions nor obligations before the wider public. It is in these cases where opponents have the biggest difficulty forcing incumbents to admit that a controversy actually constitutes a 'scandal' or 'crisis'. Opponents usually only half-heartedly blame incumbents, basically accusing them of doing a 'bad job' in some way.

Issue characteristics cannot fully explain the amount of blaming undertaken by opponents during a blame game. While the cases suggest that salience increases the amount of blame generation opponents undertake, they also reveal that there are other factors that also influence this parameter of opponent behavior. Subsequently, I briefly outline five additional factors that can help to account for this parameter of opponent behavior. First, as the CSA case suggests, prior involvement in a policy issue on the part of opponents may hamper the overall amount of blame generation during a blame game. Opponents' prior involvement is not unusual given regular changes in government and the often considerable time spans between the adoption of a policy and the point when it becomes controversial. Opponents who carry part of the policy responsibility because they were involved in its adoption risk appearing hypocritical if they blame the government of the day for its failure. For incumbents, 'inherited' policy controversies create wiggle room, allowing them to buy time and providing them with an additional blame-deflection possibility. Nevertheless, as the CSA case in

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particular suggests, this advantage diminishes during a blame game if incumbents are unable to solve the 'inherited' controversy. I expect the influence of prior involvement in a policy issue to be strongest in political systems where opponents are rather consolidated, given that the likelihood is higher that a large share of opponents is constrained by prior involvement.

Second, when incumbents have personally associated with a policy, like in the BER case, opponents are tempted to increase the amount of blame generation. A personal association provides opponents with the opportunity of transforming a policy controversy into a venerable personal scandal during which the resignation of political incumbents becomes possible. In general, blame games that contain multiple blameworthy events provide opponents (and incumbents) with more framing opportunities (e.g., they can decide whether to portray an issue as a financial issue, a moral issue, etc.). During such blame games, opponents can be expected to emphasize the most blameworthy aspect(s) of a policy controversy, while incumbents will emphasize the least blameworthy aspect(s). A consequence of these orientations is that, when a 'new' event emerges during a blame game (like the discovery of a personal involvement of the incumbent), blame game actors will change their strategy mix.

Third, as the DRONE and the SOLYNDRA cases suggest, upcoming elections may prompt opponents to invest considerably in blame generation even in the case of controversies that promise only weak public feedback. In the run-up to elections, opponents cannot be picky by sparing their blame for more promising controversies; they may be forced to 'clutch at straws'.

Fourth, blame generation may be more intensive than issue characteristics alone suggest in cases where a policy controversy becomes emblematic of a larger political conflict. In such cases, opponents can be positive that their ranting and raving will resonate widely. In the DOME case, for example, media and political interest in the controversy was out of proportion because the Millennium exhibition had become a symbol for discussing the 'New Labour' phenomenon. Without this function of the DOME controversy, opponents would have almost certainly invested less in blame generation, and Mark Knopfler would not have written the song 'Silvertown Blues' about it.

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Finally, there should be a difference between whether opponents generate blame for a controversy that lies in the past, like in the DRONE case, or for an ongoing controversy, like in the BER case. Only the latter provide opponents with recurrent occasions for blame generation.[43] While these explanatory factors can be causally relevant in particular cases, their influence on the overall blame game should not be overestimated. The method of comparative historical analysis, with its focus on longer time spans, allowed me to isolate the influence of these additional factors. In the cases examined, their influence was usually limited in time and greater blame generation did not lead to stronger public feedback.

Overall, while issue characteristics are not cast in stone, my analysis suggests that there are also limits to their malleability through communicative strategies, such as calculated overcommunication. In other words, issue characteristics do not 'lose their bite' even if political actors are hell-bent on ignoring them. The reason is that, in addition to opponents, there are other actors, like the media and the public, that hold prefabricated opinions about controversy types. For example, even in cases where opponents excessively repeat (Hansson, 2015) that a controversy is a scandal, issue characteristics have an important influence on their success prospects. In sum, one can clearly observe how opponents actively work with and are constrained by issue characteristics when focusing the public's attention on a controversy and putting pressure on incumbents.

Incumbent Behavior

The comparison of blame game interactions against the background of different controversy types reveals that issue characteristics influence two specific dimensions of incumbent behavior: their positioning toward a controversy and their concrete strategy mix.

Positioning toward the Controversy: Humble or Confident

When engaging in a controversy, incumbents are eager to express a specific attitude to the public. Once confronted with a distant-salient controversy, incumbents adopt an attitude that is in line with the dominant feeling in society. Depending on the specific controversy, this can encompass a compassionate or a rather angry attitude. When incumbents have to address a proximate-nonsalient controversy, they

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acknowledge the existence of a problem and express that they take this problem very seriously, but they simultaneously exhibit a rather confident stance. In response to a distant-nonsalient controversy, incumbents exhibit a very relaxed and confident stance.

Strategy Mix: Blame Deflection, Reframing, or Activism

Incumbents not only adopt a controversy-specific attitude, they also apply a controversy-specific strategy mix to manage blame. A first notable finding is that incumbents apply blame-deflection strategies irrespective of specific issue characteristics. At first sight, this is not very surprising because in complex policy areas, responsibility and blame deflection is usually a strategy that is easy for politicians in charge to use. A closer look at the cases, however, reveals that during salient controversies, incumbents deflect blame more intensively than during nonsalient controversies. Two reasons can account for this difference. First, incumbents face comparatively more pressure for salient controversies and only possess limited possibilities for reframing a salient controversy (see later). This makes blame deflection the only presentational strategy available to incumbents (see also Hinterleitner, 2018). Second, blame deflection and reframing can be contradictory in cases where incumbents deny the existence of a problem. Denying a problem suggests that the blame assigned by opponents is not justified at all. Hence, when incumbents apply this reframing strategy, they cannot simultaneously deflect blame because blame deflection implicitly acknowledges that someone caused a problem for which blame must be allocated.

Issue characteristics also influence whether and how incumbents attempt to reframe a controversy and how active they are in addressing it. Confronted with a distant-salient controversy, incumbents are eager to avoid getting their fingers burned by attempting to reframe it. Trying to reframe a distant-salient controversy encompasses the danger of standing on the wrong side of the controversy and is not compatible with the emotionally harmonized attitude incumbents exhibit in the face of such controversies. This is why one only observes very careful reframing attempts that never contest the existence of a problem per se. Instead, incumbents usually engage in frantic activism to signal their commitment to addressing the controversy. Anxious to secure their continuing involvement with the controversy, they usually produce

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a steady stream of inquiries, measures, amendments, or initiatives intended to tackle the problem at the root of the controversy.

Incumbents are much more inclined to reframe nonsalient controversies. In the case of a proximate-nonsalient controversy, this reframing is especially targeted at the controversy's negative effects on the wider public. Incumbents usually argue that a controversy and its consequences are much less negative than portrayed by opponents or is outweighed by multiple benefits. Surprisingly, activism was even limited in proximate-nonsalient controversies, for which I expected opponents to have a more active stance (this will be addressed later).

Confronted with a distant-nonsalient controversy, incumbents have a freer hand in reframing a controversy, often contesting whether the latter constitutes a problem or crisis at all. It is in these cases that incumbents sometimes even dare to switch from blame management to credit claiming. As Leong and Howlett (2017) state, the link between these concepts deserves more theoretical and empirical attention. At some point, a very confident blame-management approach can turn into some form of credit claiming. The study of the distant-nonsalient controversies suggests that 'favorable' issue characteristics allow incumbents to strongly reframe a controversy and thereby also switch from blame management to credit claiming.

Just like issue characteristics cannot fully account for the amount of blame generation by opponents, they also cannot solely explain the degree of activism by incumbents. Instead, institutional factors seem to be decisive, too. Institutional factors that comfortably protect incumbents (METRONET, CTR), or a policy problem that limits the opportunities for activism (BER) are also important in determining the degree of activism adopted by incumbents. With this limitation in mind, one can derive stylized patterns of incumbent behavior with regard to different controversy types. With regard to a distant-salient controversy, incumbents adopt a humble attitude, intensively deflect blame, only very carefully reframe the controversy, and strongly engage in activism. With regard to a proximate-nonsalient controversy, incumbents adopt a confident attitude, only carefully deflect blame, intensively reframe the controversy by dispelling claims of personal relevance, and only weakly engage in activism. With regard to a distant-nonsalient controversy, incumbents adopt a very confident attitude, only carefully deflect blame, if at all, intensively reframe the controversy, and only weakly engage in activism.

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Overall, it is best to consider the previously derived behavioral patterns as 'more or less' statements rather than as deterministic 'either/or' statements because blame games may contain public statements that contradict them. For example, in the distant-nonsalient SOLYNDRA case, opponents made claims of personal relevance by suggesting that the loan default constituted a waste of precious taxpayer money and that citizens had a right to know what had really been going on during the loan approval procedure. While those claims were few and not prominently voiced, they nevertheless slightly contradict my conclusion that opponents only make claims of personal relevance in case of proximate-nonsalient controversies. 'Unexpected' behavior of this sort may result from interaction effects with institutional factors, such as direct government involvement in a controversy or from misperceptions on the part of blame game actors. Both interaction effects and misperceptions will be accounted for in the remaining chapters of this book.

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