

## Commissioned Book Review: Policy Controversies and Political Blame Games

Mckenna, Matthew George

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# Policy Controversies and Political Blame Games

**Political Controversies and Political Blame Games** by **Markus Hinterleitner**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020. 248 pp, £ 75.00, ISBN: 9781108494861

Blame is everywhere. Politicians blaming one another, media reports about politicians blaming one another and now increasingly the pages of political science journals discussing blame in political life. Despite its rising popularity as a subject for the discipline, the study of political blame is divided conceptually and methodologically among various subdisciplines. Markus Hinterleitner's book *Political Controversies and Political Blame Games* is his attempt to reconcile these disparate approaches, offering a novel conceptual framework and empirical analysis which provides a new direction for the study of political blame. To state that this publication has been timely would be an understatement. With the entire globe currently trying to deal with the consequences of Covid-19, the potential for blame within and between national borders has never been greater. For readers wanting to understand the varying national blame games that will follow as societies reflect upon the current period of crisis, this book is a must read.

As a point of clarification, this book is a study of the *reaction* to policy controversies, rather than one which pays equal attention to both controversy and blame. I start with this clarification because readers primarily interested in policy controversies might feel cheated by the publication's title. Yet a focus upon *reaction* points to one of the central arguments made: whether a policy and the associated actors survive controversy depends upon the way an event's characteristics interact with the institutional features of a political system. Blame produced from controversy is always institutionally situated, and this must be recognised when attempting to understand the consequences of political blame. Yet while blame is shaped by

the institutional environment it takes place in, it is also conceived as a substantially different mode of politics, one in which argumentation is left by the wayside and 'guilt, punishment and redress takes centre' (p. 5).

To demonstrate the relationship between institutions and blame, Hinterleitner analyses 15 policy controversies across the UK, Switzerland, Germany and the USA using a compound research design (p. 11). This design permits comparison between two contextual dimensions of a controversy: the country it takes place in and the degree of proximity and salience with the public. In doing so, Hinterleitner is able to compare the same type of controversy (one which directly impacts citizens and resonates intensely with public sentiment) in multiple countries and explore the differences in the resultant blame games and their consequences. One counter-intuitive finding among many is that the UK's Westminster system, commonly understood to produce adversarial politics, experiences less disruptive blame games compared with those found in Germany, a political system normally associated with deliberation and cooperation. Before the reader takes this as a 'one up' for the UK, its lack of consequential blame games is explained by institutional blame barriers protecting incumbents from public sentiment, regardless of the public's intensity (p. 182). Hardly a win for democracy.

The value of this publication is that it shows that blame is not solely a cognitive/behavioural phenomenon, but is something shaped by the context it takes place in. Unfortunately, its primary weakness stems from the theoretical assumptions regarding context. Hinterleitner distinguishes between institutional and interpretive contextual factors. The former, such as conventions of responsibility, are considered as institutional because they are static and unchanging (p. 26). The latter, such as the degree of proximity and salience a controversy


has with the public, is considered fluxing and therefore interpretive. While in no doubt that both point to factors very important in the study of blame, the justification for the interpretive/institutional distinction is tautological. Institutional factors are static and unchanging exactly because actors are unable to change them (p. 34), whereas saliency and proximity are interpretive because an actor can reframe, and therefore change these.

Improving the justification for this distinction is necessary for Hinterleitner states that he is primarily interested in the perception political actors have of public sentiment (p. 17). A well-intentioned interest, but one which fails to demonstrate why an actor's perception of public sentiment is more important than the way actors perceive conventions of responsibility. A recent controversy in the UK, where the minister, Priti Patel, overcome accusations of breaching the ministerial code by offering an alternative reading of the rules (Haddon, 2020), speaks to the interpretive and contested nature of these 'institutions'. Going forward, the study of blame needs to recognise that it is not

only interpretations of public sentiments that influence how political actors blame, but also how an actor's interpretation of the 'rules of the game' play a crucial role.

Matthew George McKenna   
(University of Birmingham, UK)

### ORCID iD

Matthew George McKenna  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7425-2062>

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