Avoiding Blame or Claiming Credit? On the (Changed?) Role of Political Strategies in Welfare State Reform

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Abstract

In this paper, I try to contribute to the debate on (changed?) role of political strategies in welfare state reform, especially blame avoidance ones, by taking stock of the current literature. First, I assess an underlying assumption of the welfare state literature, which is that retrenchment is always electorally risky and that blame avoidance strategies are, hence, necessary. Current studies cast doubt on this assumption, because not all parties are punished equally for retrenchment and because the risk of retrenchment varies across welfare programs. The literature on so-called credit-claiming retrenchment furthermore suggests that retrenchment may offer opportunities for electoral gains. While the role of blame avoidance strategies differs under credit-claiming retrenchment, such strategies – especially of the manipulating perceptions type – are still required. My subsequent discussion of empirical studies on the employment of different types of blame avoidance strategies shows that various institutional and political conditions allow for blame avoidance, and that blame avoidance strategies are often applied. The latter probably also stems from the finding that it is political actors' *perception* that retrenchment is unpopular and requires a political, blame avoidance, strategy to succeed. Even though the literature on blame avoidance has expanded over the last years, there are still many issues to be addressed in future research, which I discuss in the last section.

1. Introduction[1]

In terms of welfare state reform, a lot has happened over the past decades. Either incrementally or radically, most developed democracies have reformed (parts of) their welfare states, for example pensions, unemployment insurance or childcare (see e.g. Palier 2010; Häusermann 2010; Vis 2010; Hemerijck 2013). Breunig and Busemeyer (2012: 921) assumed – rightly so – that at some point 'governments can no longer resort to easy ways to avoid politically costly budget decisions'. These decisions entail difficult political trade-offs because it means deciding on how to distribute scarce public funds (see also Jensen and Mortensen 2014; Van Kersbergen and Vis 2014). Welfare reforms are therefore considered *electorally risky* because of their typical unpopularity among the electorate. They are also *institutionally difficult* because of path dependence and the presence of veto players who can block the reforms (Pierson 1994, 2001). Consequently, many studies focused on *how* political actors, especially governments as the key actors in reform politics, have been able to overcome the political and institutional hurdles to welfare state reform.

One of the literature's main findings, and assumption, is that political strategies are crucial for welfare start reform. Political strategies are 'calculations of political actors related to their aims, influenced by their means and their environment, that refer to more than just one concrete situation (unlike tactics)' (Wenzelburger 2011: 1154). Political actors' calculations, in turn, are based on their motives and preferences. In his seminal study, Weaver (1986) indicates that three main types of motivations underlie governments' policy decisions: (1) credit claiming, (2) "good policy", i.e. pursuing a policy because it is worth it, irrespective of the electoral consequences, and (3) blame avoidance. Weaver (1986: 373, emphasis in original) forcefully argues that blame avoidance typically is the overriding motivation because 'voters are more sensitive to what has been done *to* them than to what has been done *for* them'; a result of individuals typically being loss averse (Kahneman et al. 1991). Blame avoidance strategies are political strategies that governments and other political actors use to try and avoid the possible blame for policies, such as welfare state reform, so as to circumvent electoral loss at the ballot box. Since Weaver's (1986) seminal study, there have been several categorizations of blame avoidance strategies (e.g., Pierson 1994; Hood 2011; Wenzelburger 2011; Van Kersbergen and Vis 2014). Table A1 in the Appendix presents an extension of Pal and Weaver's (2003: 25-33) categorization. Pal and Weaver's three broad categories or types of blame avoidance strategies are *manipulating procedures*, *manipulating perceptions* and *manipulating pay-*

offs.[2, 3] Strategies that manipulate procedures focus on both the opportunities for the reform's opponents to block the decision and for those making the decision to receive blame or avoid it, often through institutions. Strategies manipulating perceptions aim to avoid blame by changing the perceptions of those affected by the reform. Strategies manipulating payoffs try to maximize the reform's probability of success 'by manipulating the magnitude and incidence of "payoffs"–gains and losses–that different groups will experience' (Pal and Weaver 2003: 31). There are, however, also indications that the role of political strategies in welfare state reform has changed in that blame avoidance is not, or no longer, always needed; or that other strategies, like credit-claiming retrenchment (i.e. retrenchment that allows for electoral gains), trump it.

In this paper, I take stock of the recent literature on political strategies in welfare state reform, zooming in onto blame avoidance strategies, to examine whether the role of blame avoidance strategies has changed. I focus on empirical studies published in international journals, books, and as book chapter that have appeared over the last five years or so. I exclude the non-English literature and concentrate on the literature on advanced western democracies (i.e. the lion share of published work). Over this period, the number of publications on blame avoidance strategies has expanded substantially but – to the best of my knowledge – this body of work has not yet been systematically reviewed or connected. To examine the (changed?) role of blame avoidance strategies in welfare state reform, I address two questions: (1) To what extent do politicians really need blame avoidance strategies? That is to say, does welfare state reform always entail a risk of electoral punishment that all elected politicians need to deflect? And (2) to what extent are different types of blame avoidance strategies employed? And under which conditions?

I show that an increasing body of empirical research on this topic finds that retrenchment is not electorally risky for all political parties alike, and that the electoral risk of reform varies across programs. This literature also suggests that credit-claiming retrenchment takes place. While the former findings indicate that blame avoidance may not be necessary at all times, i.e. for all political parties, and for all types of welfare state reform, the latter finding does not exclude the need for a blame avoidance strategy. On the contrary, for credit-claiming retrenchment to work, a manipulating perceptions strategy is still required.

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[2] Pal and Weaver speak of loss-imposing strategies instead of blame avoidance ones. Still, their loss-imposing strategies are also blame avoidance strategies. If a political actor succeeds in imposing losses on voters, this implies that she has been able to avoid (some of) the blame that comes with it.

[3] Note that while the term manipulation is not widely used in the literature on blame avoidance – perhaps because of its negative connotation – it is actually a quite apt term, since it indicates that a blame avoidance strategy requires an act from the side of the decision-maker.

Interestingly, and relating to the prominent use of blame avoidance strategies in actual reforms, there is also recent work that finds that what drives political actors of different stripes to use blame avoidance strategies is their *perception* that reform is electorally risky (Wenzelburger 2011, forthcoming). Whether it actually is, is of less – or perhaps even no – importance. This latter finding relates to the extensive use of different types of blame avoidance strategies by political actors. In the discussion, I suggest avenues for future research based on this paper's stock-taking exercise.

2. Are blame avoidance strategies really needed?

Recently, scholars have started to question the assumption that all welfare state retrenchment is electorally dangerous for all political parties. This literature comes in three, related, flavors. First, there are scholars showing that not all parties are punished equally for retrenchment, and that some parties might even reap electoral gains because of it (Armingeon and Giger 2008; Arndt 2013; Giger and Nelson 2011, forthcoming; Schumacher 2012; Schumacher et al. 2013). Second, there are scholars arguing that retrenchment may offer credit-claiming opportunities to governments (Elmelund-Præstekær and Emmenegger 2013; Davidsson and Marx 2013). And, finally, there are studies finding that the degree of electoral risk varies across welfare state programs (e.g., Green-Pedersen 2002; Jensen 2012; Wolf et al. 2013). Let me address each of these strands of literature.

Retrenchment not electorally risky for all parties alike

Regarding the first stream of studies, Armingeon and Giger (2008) showed that voters did not automatically punish governing parties; they only did so when retrenchment was a key issue during the election campaign. This happened in around 25 per cent of the 30 cases in which benefits were cut by at least 5 per cent. In those cases, the governing parties lost at least 5 per cent of the votes because of the retrenchment. Furthermore, Giger and Nelson (forthcoming) found that only voters with favorable welfare state attitudes who do *not* believe that the welfare state hampers the economy punish retrenching governments. This result offers a micro-foundation for their earlier finding that religious and liberal conservative parties might even gain votes after retrenching unemployment replacement rates (Giger and Nelson 2011), since these parties' voters are more likely to consider the welfare state as hampering the economy. Also De Vries and Hobolt (2012) found that different voters respond differently to retrenchment. Specifically, the voters affected negatively by a reduction in universal child benefits in the Netherlands in the 1990s became more critical of the incumbent government, and less likely to vote for incumbent parties, compared to the voters unaffected by the cutbacks. The effect was stronger for the political sophisticates.

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Focusing on the increase in the retirement age in the Netherlands in 2009, Van der Velden (2013) also found that only particular groups of voters punished the government for the reform. Only those voters affected by the reform, who considered themselves as deserving of benefits, and who were politically sophisticated sanctioned the incumbents.[4]

More generally, Giger and Nelson (2011) showed that electoral punishment after retrenchment varied across party families (such as the liberals or social democrats). While no party family systematically lost votes for retrenchment, liberal and to a lesser extent religious party families gained votes after retrenchment. While corroborating Giger and Nelson's general conclusion that electoral punishment varies across parties, Schumacher et al. (2013) found that parties that were actively involved in the build-up and expansion of the welfare state, so-called positive welfare image parties (left-wing parties and Christian democrats) did systematically lose votes after retrenchment. Conversely, parties with a negative welfare image (liberals and conservatives) did not. This finding relates to Arndt's (2013) conclusion that so-called Third Way reforms are electorally risky for social democrats, a party family of which the core constituency is traditionally tied to welfare. Based on an analysis of Third Way, re-commodifying welfare reforms by British, Danish, German, and Swedish social democrats Arndt showed that such reforms are indeed electorally risky for this party family. Interestingly, in majoritarian systems like the UK, the result hereof is not so much voting for another party – as voters have hardly any, or no, party to turn to – but vote abstention. This finding is interesting because it does not show up in the analyses of Giger, Nelson, and Schumacher et al. since they focused on the actual votes cast. The analysis of the electoral consequences of social democrats' move to the middle in Germany, Sweden and the UK by Karreth et al. (2012) supports Arndt's (2013) finding of an increasing level of non-voting among social democratic voters after such a right-ward shift. Specifically, Karrett et al. argued and showed that a move away from the core social-democratic values towards the middle of the political spectrum might at first be a successful vote-seeking strategy because it increases the number of swing-voters' votes. Over the longer run, conversely, it leads to a lower vote share because both the traditional social-democratic voters and the swing-voters do no longer vote for the social democrats.

Actually, these novel empirical findings are not that surprising. Green-Pedersen (2002) identified the trade-off between keeping the economy on track (which may imply welfare state reform at some

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[4] Note that this specific group is rather small, though: only 3 per cent of the electorate (Van der Velden 2013: 25). A reason for this low degree of punishment could be that voters had hardly any alternatives to turn to. In fact, only the right wing populist parties PVV (Freedom Party), TON (Proud of the Netherlands) and the Socialist party were against a pension age increase.

stage) and upholding the welfare state status quo already over a decade ago. Green-Pedersen stated that 'the fact that governments have implemented an unpopular policy does not automatically imply that voters will punish them at the polls. For this to happen, retrenchment must be politicised and come on the political agenda so voters actually evaluate governments on the basis of their retrenchment record' (33) – i.e. precisely the condition Armingeon and Giger (2008) examined. According to Green-Pedersen, it mattered a great deal *how* the retrenchment issue was put on the agenda whether governments were punished or not for it. The reform's framing and justification, i.e. the manipulation of preferences, were crucial.

Another, related, explanation for the perhaps surprising empirical findings discussed earlier is that voters hold conflicting preferences (Schumacher et al. 2013). Voters simultaneously want to uphold the welfare state status quo *and* want lower government expenditures; preferences which are generally irreconcilable. The precise preferences vary across voters, with negative welfare image parties' voters having stronger preferences for cutting government expenditures than do positive welfare image parties' voters. The opposite pattern holds for upholding the welfare state status quo, i.e. positive welfare image parties' voters are more positive than are negative welfare image parties' voters. This means that it is easier – though not easy – for negative welfare image parties to retrench the welfare state and get away with it; whereas it is harder – though not impossible – for positive welfare image parties.

Credit-claiming retrenchment

The second stream of studies addresses so-called credit-claiming retrenchment.[5] According to these studies, retrenchment may enable governments to reap electoral gains. Especially under socioeconomically harsh conditions, retrenchment becomes a rational strategy from a vote-seeking perspective (Bonoli 2012). Still, the question is whether political actors in this case fail to follow the politically safest way and engage heads-on in retrenchment without resorting to blame avoidance strategies, as Bonoli (2012) proposed, or whether such a strategy is still applied. The latter seems most plausible. If the socioeconomic is in thus dire straits, the so-called domain in which voters find themselves might have been changed from one of gains into one of losses, making voters acceptant of the reform (Vis and Van Kersbergen 2007, Vis

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[5] Credit-claiming retrenchment differs from what Bonoli (2012) labels "affordable" credit-claiming. The latter entails the expansion of policies (like childcare) that may offer a win–win situation in that they are popular among large segments of the population (especially parents of young children) while at the same time addressing a social problem (combing work and family life). Because the spending on these programs so far is relatively limited, an expansion will be visible to voters – an increase of 0.5% of GDP on pension or health care spending is likely unnoticeable in most countries, while the same expansion of childcare will be very noticeable.

2010). This, however, is *not* an automatic process. While it may be obvious to citizens and political actors alike that "something" needs to be done – the current consensus in most Western democracies that have been hit severely by the Great Recession (Bermeo and Pontusson 2012) –, it is not at all obvious *what* this something needs to be (e.g., Vis et al. 2013). This means that voters need to be convinced not just that *a* decision is needed, but that *this particular* decision is needed. Convincing voters that a proposed decision is the appropriate one giving the circumstances requires an active strategy from the side of the government. The manipulating perceptions' strategy damned if you do, damned if you don't (see table A1 in the Appendix) is an example hereof.

The studies addressing credit-claiming retrenchment tend to agree on the continuing relevance of blame avoidance. Davidsson and Marx (2012), for example, identified a combination of conditions under which retrenchment can be credit-claiming, elaborating Bonoli's argument on the harsh socioeconomic situation. Davidsson and Marx argued and showed by means of retrenchment of unemployment benefits by German and Swedish left-wing and right-wing governments that credit-claiming retrenchment was possible when unemployment was highly salient and issue ownership of successfully addressing unemployment by the government was contested. Prior to the retrenchment of unemployment benefits, the salience of unemployment rose and the government's competence ratings fell. Under this combination of conditions, the tradeoff between keeping the economy on track and upholding the welfare state status quo tilted towards the former. For the retrenchment to be credit-claiming, an active reframing strategy from the government is considered key. Or in their own words: 'if the government successfully frames the reform as a way to overcome economic problems, it may receive more public support than inactivity would' (Davidsson and Marx 2012: 4). Related, Elmelund-Præstekær and Emmenegger (2013: 28) argued that 'retrenchment is not intrinsically unpopular if a government can survive harsh retrenchment by means of strategic framing'. But they, rightly, pointed out that proactively (re-)framing unpopular reforms is not risk free. The government does not control the media, which means that it cannot affect the framing of a reform 'in all channels at once, especially if the political opposition attempts to frame the reform in a completely different way. Thus, the framing strategy does not render the blame-avoidance strategy of obfuscation redundant' (29). While not calling it such, Stiller's (2010) "ideational leaders" seem to be engaging in some kind of credit-claiming retrenchment, whereby they also apply some manipulating perceptions blame avoidance strategy. Focusing on German welfare reforms in the areas of pensions, health care and unemployment, Stiller argued that such reforms occur when the responsible minister acts as an ideational leader, which means that she exposes the drawbacks of the policy status quo and tries to build consensus to generate support for the reform, i.e. claim credit for it. All in all, whereas the studies dis-

cussed under the first strand of literature suggest that some political parties may not need to resort to blame avoidance strategies at all, credit-credit claiming retrenchment goes hand-in-hand with the use of blame avoidance strategies, especially of the manipulating perceptions type.

Electoral risk of retrenchment varies across welfare programs

The third line of research has focused on the differences in the degree of unpopularity of cutbacks across welfare state programs. Also such ideas are not new (see for example Pierson 1994). Green-Pedersen (2002) argued that retrenchment of programs closely related to the labor market can be justified more easily by governments, for instance by claiming that unemployment benefits cause idleness among the unemployed (i.e. manipulation of perceptions). The electoral risk of cutting back these programs is therefore lower than of programs farther from the labor market (like pensions). Related, Jensen (2012) distinguished social programs addressing labor-market risks (e.g., unemployment) from programs addressing life-course risks (e.g., failing health, old age). Because life-course risks are by and large uncorrelated with the income distribution, contrary to labor-market risks, the median voter is much more favorable towards social programs addressing life-course risks than she is towards programs addressing labor-market risks (see also Esping-Andersen 1999). Consequently, Jensen expected (and found) that both left-wing and right-wing governments have an incentive to expand spending on life course-related risks' programs. Moreover, he also showed that right-wing governments have quite some leeway to retrench the labor-market risk programs, that is to say until labor market risk exposure rises (e.g. because of poor economic circumstances) and the median voter becomes more favorable also of social programs addressing labor-market risks. In line with Jensen (2012), Elmelund-Præstekær and Baggesen-Klitgaard (2012: 1093) argued that programs designed to absorb democratically distributed risks, like healthcare, pension and educational programs, are demanded by a broad spectrum of voters. In these areas, both left-wing and right-wing governments have an incentive to cater to the median voter rather than to core constituencies or party voters. The overall arguments of Jensen (2012) and Elmelund-Præstekær and Baggesen-Klitgaard (2012) also corroborate the line of research on the deservingness of benefit recipients. The latter literature shows that pensioners and the sick are seen as more deserving of a benefit than are the disabled and, particularly, the unemployed (e.g., Petersen et al. 2011).

There is an increasing body of empirical work that supports Jensen's (2012) argument that life-course social programs are more popular among voters than labor-market risk programs are, making the former electorally riskier to retrench. Wolf et al. (2013), for example, found that cutbacks to pensions that are particularly unpopular (see also Tepe and Vanhuysse 2011). Moreover, Giger and Nelson's (2011) find-

ing that liberal parties do not gain electorally by retrenching sick pay also corroborates Jensen's (2012) argument. Giger (2012), conversely, argued that cutbacks of pensions and health care, i.e. life-course risk programs *par excellence*, were only unpopular among those voters who were interested in social policy (probably between 20 and 40 per cent of the sample). To the majority of the respondents, such retrenchment did not lead to falling governments' ratings.

Elmelund-Præstekær and Baggesen-Klitgaard (2012) have expanded the existing literature by re-defining which kind of reforms could by their nature be an exercise in blame avoidance. Their work builds and elaborates Pierson's (1994) distinction between programmatic retrenchment and systemic retrenchment. Programmatic retrenchment 'results from spending cuts or reshaping of welfare state programs' (15). Systemic retrenchment refers both to general changes in the political economy that stimulate future retrenchment (such as a policy-induced change in public opinion or the weakening of pro-welfare state interest groups) and changes in the institutional structures (15-17). Elmelund-Præstekær and Baggesen-Klitgaard's (2012) *policy retrenchment* is very similar to Pierson's programmatic retrenchment and defined as 'fundamentally about redistribution of *substantial* resources within a given welfare policy' (Elmelund-Præstekær and Baggesen-Klitgaard 2012: 1091, emphasis in original). Policy retrenchment is (highly) visible and, consequently, electorally (highly) risky. Their *institutional retrenchment* focuses more concretely on institutional changes in specific programs than Pierson's broader concept of systemic retrenchment does. Specifically, institutional retrenchment entails 'significant changes in the organizational structures of political programmes likely to facilitate welfare state contraction in the future' (1092). Such retrenchment is less visible, more long-term oriented and, consequently, less risky electorally. In line with Jensen (2012), Elmelund-Præstekær and Baggesen-Klitgaard (2012) find variation across class-risk and life-course risk programs. While, overall, they find approximately the same proportion of retrenching bills for their two class-risk programs (labor market and housing) and two life-course risk programs (health and education) – which is about 25 per cent of all bills –, the type of retrenchment varies substantially across, especially, labor market programs and education policy (1099).

Given these recent empirically studies, are blame avoidance strategies actually needed? As noted, the literature on the variation in electoral risk of welfare state reform across political parties suggests that some parties (e.g., the conservatives) may not need blame avoidance strategies. The literature on credit-claiming retrenchment, conversely, typically assumed that this type of retrenchment requires a blame avoidance strategy to be successful. Regarding the latter stream of studies, the need for blame avoidance seems to vary depending on which program is retrenched. Cutting back life-course risk programs is electorally risky

for all political parties and would always require a blame avoidance strategy. Retrenching labor-market risks' programs, conversely, might not be electorally risky for right-wing parties, that is to say, when the socioeconomic situation is positive enough. All in all, these studies suggest anything but the *general* irrelevance of blame avoidance strategies.

Recently, Wenzelburger (2011, forthcoming) has convincingly shown that what motivates political actors to engage in political strategies such as blame avoidance is not so much the real, objective risk of electoral punishment, but political actors' *perception* of the risk of being punished. Politicians *do* care about the risk involved in welfare retrenchment. Wenzelburger (forthcoming) conducted qualitative elite interviews with 15 high-level politicians and civil servants from four countries (Belgium, Sweden, Canada and France) who were in office in the early 1990s; a time when their economies faced recessions and austerity programs needed to be implemented. His analysis showed that these politicians feared or simply assumed that they would be punished electorally for the measures taken. These political actors indicated that they used blame avoidance strategies to lower this electoral risk. Thus, it was the (real) *perception* of electoral risk that motivated them to turn to blame avoidance strategies, rather than the reform's objective risk. Wenzelburger (forthcoming) proposed an experimental set-up to test the effect of blame avoidance strategies on the electoral outcome. This is a highly welcome addition to existing work and one of the avenues to pursue further in future research (see Section 4).[6]

3. Blame avoidance strategies in practice

To what extent are the different types of blame avoidance strategies (manipulating procedures, manipulating perceptions, or manipulating payoffs, see table A1) employed by political actors, and under which conditions? My discussion of empirical studies over the last five years or so demonstrates that all strategies have been employed and under varying conditions.

Pursuing welfare state reform by manipulating procedures

The first category of blame avoidance strategies used in welfare reform focuses on the manipulation of procedures, mainly concentrating on the role of institutional set-ups. This means that political actors' role can be less active than with the other two types of blame avoidance strategies, because the institutions so

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[6] In practice it is not easy to develop an experimental control setting that is both realistic enough and void of a blame avoidance strategy. For example, giving a reason for a reform (e.g., increasing unemployment levels) can already been seen as a (mild) blame avoidance strategy. As Wenzelburger (forthcoming) acknowledges this problem but rightly stresses that this makes the experiment's results more conservative.

to speak do the work for them. However, also manipulating procedures is not an automatic process only. A typical argument in this line of work is that the more power is concentrated (i.e. in Westminister systems), the lower are the institutional constraints and veto points and thus the easier it is to enact reforms. Easier enactment of reforms generally means a lower need to employ blame avoidance strategies (Wenzelburger 2011: 1158). Concentrated power, however, also indicates concentrated responsibility, which increases rather than reduces the need for blame avoidance. With higher numbers of veto players, i.e. a higher level of power dispersion, it is easier to diffuse blame because responsibility for a measure spreads among many players (e.g., Weaver 1986).

Several studies examined how the different institutional levels within countries (vertical and horizontal) offer opportunities for avoiding blame. Vertically, Béland and Myles (2012) showed that Canada's federal system offers opportunities for blame avoidance or at least blame sharing, which political actors use (see also Lecours and Béland 2010). Costa-i-Font (2010) proposed that decentralized systems with local and central governmental authorities lead to two scenarios. In the first one, which Italy exemplifies, opinions on how to reform clash among institutional levels and the opportunities for blame avoidance are limited, hampering reform. In the second scenario, exemplified by Spain, blame diffusion and blame-sharing enable reform. By focusing on formal authority, i.e. the institutional level that is actually responsible, Mortensen (2013) examined which governmental level got blamed for unpopular policies. Focusing on responsibility attribution on health care issues in Denmark, based on a content analysis of over 2,000 articles before and after a major health care reform, Mortensen showed that decentralization to a regional authority shifts the possible blame, but also the possible credit. In that sense, decentralizing formal authority has the expected, yet until Mortensen's work untested, effect of responsibility deflection. Interestingly, and in line with the negativity effect, Mortensen also found that the central government is more likely to lose credit than to avoid blame (176).

Generally, the effect of federalism on the opportunities for blame avoidance and the occurrence of reform can vary. So-called power-sharing federalism, like the German system, tends to hinder reform, whereas power-separating federalism, like the Canadian system tends to facilitate reform (Jordan 2009). Related, Wenzelburger (2011: 1176) found that country differences, particularly in terms of their institutional set-up and the political parties in power, influence which political strategies can be used most effectively.

Also focusing on the effect of the institutional set-up, Jensen and Mortensen (2014) examined the moderating effect of institutional fragmentation on welfare state retrenchment in the context of fiscal stress. They propose that institutional fragmentation enables blame diffusion. In such systems, both left-

wing and right-wing governments are expected to retrench, but the former will only do so moderately while the latter will do so radically. Under fiscal stress, all governments have to make trade-offs, and the opportunity for blame diffusion pushes also left-wing governments toward the retrenchment lane. Under a "normal" situation, i.e. in equilibrium, high institutional fragmentation ensures stability. Breunig and Busemeyer (2012) also focus on the effect of fiscal stress. In general, discretionary spending (public investment (such as military spending or agricultural subsidies) is cut back more than is entitlement spending (on for example pensions and unemployment benefits) because of the stronger institutional, legal and political constraints that the latter confront. However, under fiscal stress, the electoral system starts to play a key role and somewhat changes this pattern. In majoritarian systems, governments who want to minimize the electoral loss shield discretionary spending from cutbacks because their constituencies are tied to specific policies and/or areas. In proportional representation (PR) systems, conversely, governments are better off shielding entitlement programs from cutbacks because these programs have broad beneficiaries whose votes are needed for re-election (922). The political strategy adopted here is thus to select that part of the trade-off that is least hurtful electorally. In majoritarian systems, this means upholding discretionary spending at the cost of entitlement programs' spending; in PR systems, the choice is the opposite: upholding entitlement programs' spending at the cost of discretionary spending.

All in all, there is ample evidence that political actors indeed make use of the opportunities of the institutional structure for implementing welfare reform, indicating that they employ blame avoidance strategies of the manipulating procedures type. This literature does not specify which type of institutional constellation lends itself best for successful blame avoidance, i.e. the avoidance of electoral punishment. In general, this literature is less interested in the electoral effects of welfare reform, possibly moderated by the use of blame avoidance strategies, than it is in the occurrence and the process of welfare reform itself.

Pursuing welfare state reform by manipulation perceptions

A second strand of literature on blame avoidance strategies in welfare reform focuses on the manipulation of perceptions, typically those of voters. Note that manipulating perceptions generally means having to act visibly, conflicting with an underlying assumption in the new politics' literature that reforms are best kept invisible. In Section 2, I already argued that blame avoidance strategies of the manipulating perceptions type are among other employed when political actors try to pursue credit-claiming retrenchment (see e.g., Stiller 2010; Davidsson and Marx 2012; Elmelund-Præstekær and Emmenegger 2013; for a different point, see Bonoli 2012), so I will not repeat that point here.

In terms of the success of manipulating perceptions so as to avoid blame, a body of empirical

work suggests that this will be easier when the socioeconomic situation is deteriorating (Vis 2009, 2010; Hollanders and Vis 2013; Van Kersbergen and Vis 2014). Under such a situation, political actors may convince voters more easily that something needs to be done to turn the tides, such as a welfare state reform. Still, implementing reforms under a dire socioeconomic situation remains difficult, to say the least. The current poor approval ratings of most governments that are implementing reforms so as to address the effects of the financial and economic crisis signify this. One of the reasons for this is that during a poor socioeconomic situation, the share of the voters who needs, or may soon need, to draw on welfare state benefits increases. This typically leads to higher, not lower, support for welfare state programs (Vis et al. 2011). Whether a government is able to get away with reform under this situation also depends on issue ownership: to what extent do voters trust the governing party or parties to uphold the welfare state as much as possible *and* to what extent do they expect that this party or parties can bring the economy back on track? We still lack a full understanding of when and why a blame avoidance strategy that manipulates perceptions is successful (or not).

Pursuing welfare state reform by manipulating payoffs

The blame avoidance strategies falling under the category of manipulating payoffs have received significant attention in the literature. Recall that these strategies intend to lower the blame, and thereby increase the reform's success, by manipulating the incidence of gains and losses among those affected by the reform. Bonoli and Palier (2009), for example, hold that governments have been able to institute radical reforms by targeting predominantly those groups with retrenching policies that are least likely to mobilize politically. In the case of pension reforms, these are often argued to be the younger generations (see Larsen 2008). Whether age is a political cleavage or is undecided in the literature, though. According to Goerres (2008), such a cleavage is a myth. His analysis of German pension policy – a country with the majority of voting citizens being aged above 50 years – revealed no age cleavage in terms of party preferences.

Manipulating payoffs is not easy, though. For one, it is difficult to decide which group is the best choice – from a vote-seeking perspective – to let bear the burden of retrenchment. Lindvall and Rueda (2013: 2), for example, discussed the so-called insider–outsider dilemma that centre-left parties (especially social democrats) face. If these parties emphasize insiders' interests, outsiders are likely to either vote for radical political parties or abstain from voting. If they emphasize outsiders' interests, conversely, insiders are likely to vote for the center-right.

The blame avoidance opportunities that derive from a reform's timing are also much debated.

Already since the 1970s, timing within the electoral cycle has been analyzed as an important factor for governments to push-through potentially risky reforms. Building on the extensive literature on political business cycles (Nordhaus 1975, see Drazen 2000; Lewis-Beck and Paldam 2000), Fernádez (2012) analyzed the strategic consideration of the electoral calendar as a strategy for avoiding blame in pension reform. Such timing may work because of the interaction of two effects: first, in the beginning of the election cycle, governments typically experience a honeymoon period, offering more political capital to act and, second, because of voters' cognitive biases (such as that they remember more recent events better), the political costs of implementing unpopular reforms early in the electoral cycle are smaller. Fernández found that the hazard rate of a pension retrenchment is 75 per cent higher in a post-election year than in any other year of the electoral cycle. He also found that the hazard rate of pension retrenchment is higher when low economic grow is combined with medium or high population ageing (86). Related, Tepe and Vanhuysse (2011) conducted an interesting analysis in which a blame avoidance strategy, in their case the delay of the implementation of a pension reform or what they label strategic timing, is the dependent variable instead of the independent one. They defined "medium" and "large" 'cutback events as reductions over a period of three years of respectively 8 and 12 percent in pension generosity scores' (128), and examined to what extent three factors (partisanship, the electoral cycle and institutional rigidity) can account for delays in pension generosity cutbacks. Stated differently, Tepe and Vanhuysse did not aim to assess the success (or absence thereof) of blame avoidance strategies, but were interested in the factors that relate to the use of this strategy (see also Tepe and Vanhuysse 2010: 1215). Socioeconomic problem pressure (i.e., rising unemployment and population ageing) delayed large-size cutbacks but accelerated medium-size ones, probably as a way to avoid the even bitterer electoral pill of large cutbacks.

Jacobs (2011: 11) argued that the 'theories of the politics of imposing policy losses' should be temporally disaggregated because 'there are critical differences between the politics of transferring resources between groups at a given moment in time and the politics of imposing costs today to invest in gains tomorrow'. Jacobs proposed that one of the necessary conditions for governments to make such investments is electoral safety.[7] A government will be in such a situation under the, rare, situation that the opposition is weak or divided and the threat to losing office is minimal (45). The more likely scenario is that voters are tilted against investment, because (1) the detrimental long-term effects have not yet taken place and are therefore discounted by the voters, especially compared to the policy costs or social problems that have already materialized and (2) the complexity of predicting long-term consequences are vast

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[7] The other two necessary conditions for governments to pursue long-term investment are expected long-term social returns and institutional capacity (Jacobs 2011: 50-71).

(see also Jacobs and Matthews 2012). To get around these problems, 'investing governments will seek to shift the electoral question from, "Are you better off today than you were four years ago?" to "Have we made you better off over the long run?"' (Jacobs 2011: 46). It is, of course, not obvious that this framing will be successful. The electoral risk of a policy investment will be smaller when the policy problem the investment sets out to address is becoming more salient. 'Governments can invest with electoral safety to the extent that (a) politicians enjoy opportunities – generated by the policy or fiscal context – to strategically obscure investment's short-term costs or (b) information about the long run is structured in a way that vividly signals the prospect of future losses without investment' (49).

4. Discussion

In this paper, I have taken stock of the literature on blame avoidance that has appeared over the last five years or so. Focusing on two questions – (1) to what extent do politicians really need blame avoidance strategies? And (2) to what extent are different type of blame avoidance strategies employed? –, I examined whether the role of blame avoidance strategies in welfare state reform has changed. The shortest, yet incomplete, answer to this question is *no*. The different types of blame avoidance strategies – manipulating perceptions, manipulating payoffs, and manipulating procedures – still play a key role in welfare reforms. What has changed is our empirical knowledge of the conditions under which blame avoidance strategies are really needed and of their employment.

A recent strand of literature puts forward that retrenchment may be a means for government to reap electoral gains, so-called credit-claiming retrenchment. However, scholars typically assume that for retrenchment to be credit-claiming, voters' perceptions need to be manipulated (e.g. by strategic reframing). Blame avoidance strategies of this type thus complement credit-claiming retrenchment. Another increasing body of empirical literature questions the need for blame avoidance. For one, studies demonstrated that welfare state retrenchment is not electorally risky for all political parties alike. Some parties do not systematically loose votes after retrenchment, which means that these parties may not need to resort to blame avoidance strategies. Moreover, current work also indicates that reform of some welfare programs, especially catering to life-course risks (like pensions), is electorally much riskier than reform of other programs, especially those catering to labor market risks (like unemployment insurance). Also this suggests that the need for blame avoidance strategies may vary, in this case across programs.

However, the problem of these latter type of studies is that they cannot exclude the possibility that there is no – or little – electoral punishment *because* blame avoidance strategies have been employed successfully. It could, for example, be the case that conservative parties are not punished systematically

for retrenchment because they succeeded in manipulating voters' perceptions. We lack a theoretically defined means to systematically identify the employment as well as success of blame avoidance strategies (cf. Wenzelburger forthcoming). Developing such measures would be difficult but, if successful, a major contribution to the field. Let me give a few suggestions on how to perhaps to proceed. First, for each reform, we need information on the date, ideally three: date of proposal, decision, and implementation). We also need to know whether the reform was part of a package or not. The latter would be a sign of the use of a manipulating procedure strategy, because packaging a reform means hiding it. Next, we need information of the reform's target group. Which group(s) of voters gain and which ones loose from the reform? The higher is the degree of targeting, the stronger is the indication that a manipulating payoffs strategy is being employed. The latter would also be the case if the reform is timed strategically, e.g. by including a phase-in period and by being implemented only in the future. To assess the employment of a manipulating perceptions strategy, we can look at the argumentation given by the political actors who propose the reform. To what extent do they try to convince the voters that the reform is necessary? Do they actively try to shape voters' attitude toward the reform? To get this information, we can examine official governmental documents (such as the bill proposals), press statements, but also newspaper articles on the proposed reform. Collecting these kinds of data on the employment of blame avoidance strategies should be possible, also for a large number of countries, a relatively long time period, and different types of welfare state reform, but it would surely be time-consuming.

For assessing the success of blame avoidance strategies, we could for example compare approval rating of the government or of individual political parties before the reform was proposed and after it. Approval ratings could, of course, be affected by many other issues than a specific welfare reform. However, if the ratings are close enough to the date at which the reform was proposed, this should give us an indication of the reform's impact. The effect of some blame avoidance strategies should be relatively direct. This holds especially for strategies of the manipulating payoffs and manipulating procedures type. If these strategies work, i.e. are successful in lowering the reform's possible electoral risk, the approval ratings before and after the reform should not differ significantly. If the strategy or strategies were unsuccessful, the ratings should differ significantly. The manipulating perceptions strategy would typically take longer to take effect. Comparing approval ratings just before and just after the reform's proposal (although this should also be done) will therefore not tap into this. Depending on the use of the strategy – which is established in the first step, see above – the "right" moment for assessing the blame avoidance strategy's effect can be established. This would, for instance, be the case if the government no longer communicates the need for the reform through press releases or in newspapers. Table 1 summarizes this

idea.

Table 1. Idea for measuring the employment of blame avoidance strategies and their success

ASSESSING EMPLOYMENT OF BLAME AVOIDANCE STRATEGY		
Step 1: Date each reform (proposed, decided, implemented)	Is there manipulation of payoffs in terms of timing?	
Step 2: Reform part of package or not	If yes, manipulation of procedures	
Step 3: Assess reform's target group	The higher the degree of targeting, the higher the indication of manipulation of payoffs	
Step 4: Assess if voters' perceptions manipulated		Examine the argumentation given for the reform by the political actor proposing it, e.g. in bill proposals, press statements, and newspaper articles
ASSESSING SUCCESS OF BLAME AVOIDANCE STRATEGY		
Compare approval ratings before and directly after the reform (for assessing effect of manipulating payoffs and manipulating procedures);		
Compare approval ratings before and after the reform, when the political actor's manipulation perception strategy has stopped (for assessing effect of manipulating perceptions; use information from step 4 above to know when this strategy's employment has ended).		

In addition to trying the develop measures for the employment of different types of blame avoidance strategies and their success in lowering electoral blame, in terms of future research I also see much merit in further exploring the success (i.e. effect) of blame avoidance strategies by means of experiments. Further exploring the effect of blame avoidance strategies is needed not least because scholars disagree as to whether blame avoidance strategies have the desired effect.

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APPENDIX

Table A1 Categories of blame avoidance strategies

Manipulating procedures	*Insulation*: Delegate decision-making power to another body (e.g., court, regulatory agency) that is less sensitive to blame-generating pressures; *Passing the buck*: Delegate detailed decision-making power to another body, but constrain its options so that it will have to impose losses while shouldering the blame for doing so; *Agenda limitation*: Keep loss-imposing actions from being taken openly (e.g., by bundling them with other legislation) so as to limit blame-generating activity by opponents. *Organisational strategies*: Intelligent planning of a reform (Wenzelburger 2011)
Manipulating perceptions	*Obfuscation*: Use technical changes or other mechanisms to lower visibility of loss-imposing actions (see Pierson 1994); *Finding a scapegoat*: Blame loss-imposing action on another actor (e.g., courts, a previous government) to make it seem inevitable and/or necessary); *Circling the wagons*: Achieve a consensus among all major policymakers before a loss-imposing initiative is announced, to make that initiative seem inevitable and necessary; *Redefining the issue*: Portray loss-imposing action in a new way that mobilizes on its behalf previously un-mobilized beneficiaries of that action and/or those with no direct stake in it; *Justification*: Try and convince the voters that the reform is needed and just (Green-Pedersen 2002); *Damned if you do, damned if you don't*: Try to manipulate the domain of the voter so that the gains domain is reframed into a losses domain, making plausible that no matter which party or government rules, the reform will take place because the status quo is untenable (Vis and Van Kersbergen 2007); *Strategic re-framing*: Re-frame an originally unpopular reform into a "popular" one, hence turning the reform into a potential vote-winner (Elmelund-Præstekær and Emmenegger 2013, see also Levy 2010). *Strategic communication*: phrasing the reform such that the changes of electoral punishment are minimized (Wenzelburger 2011).
Manipulating payoffs	*Dispersion*: Keep level of losses low and broad enough or disperse over a long time period, so that opposition lacks incentives to mobilize; *Compensation*: Provide sufficient compensation to specific categories of potential losers so as to mitigate or dispel their opposition (cf. Pierson 1994); *Exemption*: Exempt enough specific categories of opponents of loss-imposing action to split and weaken opposition coalition (cf. Pierson's 1994 division strategy and Vanhuysse's 2006 divide and pacify strategy); *Concentration*: Imposes losses on groups that are politically weakest or viewed least sympathetically by others and, thus, unlikely to build a broad coalition against loss-imposing action (Pierson's 1994 division strategy); *Creative accounting and lies, damn lies and statistics*: Try to redefine the terms according to which the outcomes are measured that are feared to have negative con-sequences to change the domain of voters from one of gains into one of losses (Vis and Van Kersbergen 2007). *"Automatic" retrenchment* (Weaver 1988) *Delaying the effects of the reform*, or strategic timing (e.g., Bonoli and Palier 2009)

Source: Pal and Weaver (2003: 28-29, table 1-4); the blame avoidance strategies in table A1 including a reference were added by the author.