

## Voting as a Counter-Strategy in the Blame Game

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Politicians are constantly at risk of being blamed. They make decisions that affect large constituencies, and they are ascribed near-impossible responsibilities—get everyone a job, make health care affordable, prevent all terrorist attacks, control the planet’s climate, and stop spending money. When things go bad, mobs of blamers come looking for justice. Faced with menacing accusations, leaders need strategies for escaping the scorn of righteous crowds. Here we propose and test the hypothesis that one of these strategies is voting. That is, we investigate whether leaders ask groups to vote on issues to reduce the leader’s responsibility for bad outcomes.

Malle, Guglielmo, and Monroe (this issue) proposed the path model of blame, which builds on a large literature about blame in social psychology. This psychological research offers insights into politics, helping to explain when and why people blame politicians as well as how leaders use particular tactics and institutions to avoid blame. In turn, the political arena provides a valuable test bed for psychological theories of blame, presenting a rich source of case studies and natural experiments (Weaver, 1986). Darley and Pittman (2003) leveraged this reciprocal relationship between psychology and cultural institutions, particularly looking at blame in the context of legal systems. We do so in the context of political leaders and group decisions.

The path model (Malle et al., this issue) explains why politicians are particularly vulnerable to blame. First, people blame individuals not only for intentional violations such as taking bribes or personal scandals but also for unintentional consequences. This means that good intentions alone will not protect leaders from blame. Politicians are regularly blamed for events they clearly did not intend, such as damage from natural disasters like floods, hurricanes, tornadoes, and blizzards (Arceneaux & Stein, 2006; Healy & Malhotra, 2009, 2010). The path model proposes a bifurcation in information processing such that unintended harms activate a search for individuals who, first, had an obligation to prevent the bad outcome and, second, were capable of preventing it. Politicians are attributed enormous obligations and are presumed capable of meeting them. Moreover, politicians exaggerate their own capabilities to impress constituents during election campaigns. The path model implies

that quixotic obligations and exaggerated capacities create a recipe for extreme blame.

Faced with imminent blame, we should expect politicians to use counter-strategies to avoid responsibility (McGraw, 1990, 1991; Weaver, 1986). The path model suggests several evasive maneuvers (Malle et al., this issue). The requirement for warrant states that people expect blame to be justified with reasons and evidence. Hence, leaders can evade blame by hiding their decisions or the effects. This motive for secrecy, operating over long time scales, might shape institutions such as laws restricting classified information, special operations for covert military attacks, and private diplomacy in international conflicts (Kurizaki, 2007). The path model further focuses attention on causality, reasons, obligations, and capacity. Politicians can try to persuade constituents that they did not cause the event, had good reasons for doing so, or did not have the obligation or capacity to prevent it. They can also avoid taking action to reduce condemnation (DeScioli, Asao, & Kurzban, 2012; DeScioli, Bruening, & Kurzban, 2011; DeScioli, Christner, & Kurzban, 2011). Last, leaders can delegate decisions to other people to shift responsibility away from themselves.

We test whether voting functions as a counter-strategy to blame. This is part of a larger research question about why people vote in general. To clarify, we are not asking why people show up to *cast a vote* in a formal election (Green & Gerber, 2008). We are asking why *groups of people use voting* to make a collective decision, rather than other decision methods such as deferring to a leader, requiring a consensus, flipping a coin, consulting an expert, running an auction, and so on.

We propose that one reason groups vote is because leaders use voting to deflect blame. We motivate this idea with an example: In 2013, U.S. president Obama had to decide whether to launch a missile strike against Syria for using nerve gas against rebels. He previously threatened Syria with punishment for crossing a “red line” prohibiting chemical weapons. Obama would likely be blamed both for backing down and for following through on the threat. Instead of making the call, he put the decision to a vote in Congress (which was ultimately precluded by an agreement negotiated by Russia). Arguably, this

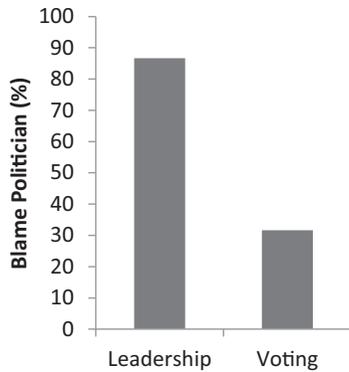


Figure 1. Percentage of participants who blamed the mayor for flood damage when he decided independently or held a vote.

move could have deflected blame away from Obama by shifting responsibility to Congress.

Research on how people perceive causal chains and intervening agents supports the idea that voting can reduce blame. All actions have infinite causal effects so cognitive systems need decision rules for narrowing in on the most relevant links in a causal chain. Previous research indicates that blame is increased for direct causal effects and decreased for effects that are mediated by additional causal links (Alicke, 1992; reviewed in Malle et al., this issue). More generally, research in cognitive psychology (outside of blame research) shows that perception of causation is decreased by intermediate links, and further, mediated causes are encoded in language by distinct verb constructions (Wolff, 2003). Given these ideas, when a leader makes a decision by holding a vote, the group's vote becomes a mediating cause between the leader's decision and bad outcomes. If this intervening link reduces perceived causality, then the path model predicts reduced blame. Further, a mediating link might be particularly exculpatory when it is another person's decision because this creates an alternative target for blame (Alicke, 1992).

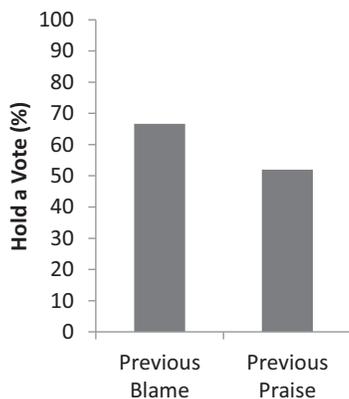


Figure 2. Percentage of participants who would hold a vote rather than decide independently when the townspeople previously blamed or praise similar decisions.

This suggests that a vote could shift blame from the politician to the voters.

At the same time, there are good reasons to doubt the counter-strategy hypothesis. First, the leader decides to hold the vote and to abide by it. Although voting adds a mediating cause, the leader still plays a dominant causal role. In the law, for instance, an intervening cause reduces liability only if it is unforeseeable and independent of the actor's behavior. Clearly, the possible outcomes of a group's vote are foreseeable (especially when the leader chooses the list of options) and the vote is dependent on the leader's choice to hold the vote. Second, according to the path model (Malle et al., this issue), blame for unintended events is based on obligation and capacity. Holding a vote does not affect either factor because the leader still has the same original obligations and capacities before choosing to hold the vote. Last, previous research found that politicians who made excuses by shifting responsibility to other people were judged more harshly, showing that trying to shift blame can backfire (McGraw, 1990, 1991).

In Experiment 1, we test whether holding a vote reduces a politician's blame. In Experiment 2, we switch from the constituent's perspective to the leader's perspective. We test whether people in a leadership role are more likely to hold a vote when they are at greater risk of blame. Last, we discuss general issues surrounding the psychology and politics of blame.

### Experiment 1

We investigate whether politicians can reduce blame by delegating their decisions to a group vote. Participants read a scenario about a mayor who is deciding whether to reinforce a wall to protect against floods from an impending storm. Ultimately the wall is not reinforced, it fails in the storm, and much of the town is destroyed. In two conditions, we vary whether the mayor made the decision independently or held a vote at the town meeting (keeping the outcome constant). We test whether participants show less blame for the mayor who held a vote compared to the mayor who made an independent decision.

We selected the context of natural disasters to focus on unintended consequences and events that are difficult or impossible to control. Moreover, natural disasters occur frequently, are highly visible, and have substantial effects on constituents' lives and politicians' fates (Arceneaux & Stein, 2006; Healy & Malhotra, 2009, 2010).

### Methods

We recruited participants to complete a short study (<5 min) using the MTurk website (Buhrmester,

Kwang, & Gosling, 2011; DeScioli & Kurzban, 2009a). We excluded participants ( $n = 2$ ) who failed the comprehension check or previously participated in a related study, yielding a final sample of 120 participants (33% female; age:  $M = 29.5$ ,  $SD = 7.4$ ).

Participants read a fictional scenario about a politician who is making a decision about a town's preparations for an impending storm. Participants were randomly assigned to the leadership condition or voting condition. In the leadership condition, participants read the following:

Mr. Johnson is the Mayor of Brooktown. Mr. Johnson's job is to make important decisions for the community. Mr. Johnson is deciding whether to reinforce a wall to protect the town from flood waters caused by an impending storm. If the wall fails then the town will be severely damaged but reinforcing it is very costly and will put the town in debt. Mr. Johnson takes a leadership role and makes the final decision. The town saves money by leaving the wall as it is. When the storm comes, the flood waters break through the wall and much of the town is destroyed.

In the voting condition, participants read the same scenario, except the sentence "Mr. Johnson takes a leadership role and makes the final decision" was replaced with "Mr. Johnson holds a vote at the town meeting and chooses the option that receives the most votes."

Participants answered "Is Mr. Johnson to blame for the town's destruction?" by choosing *yes* or *no*. Next, they answered "How much blame does Mr. Johnson deserve for the town's destruction?" on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*no blame at all*) to 4 (*some blame*) to 7 (*very much blame*). Participants could explain their decision in a textbox and then answered demographic questions and a comprehension question.

## Results

In the leadership condition, 87% of participants blamed the mayor for the town's destruction. In the voting condition, 32% of participants blamed the mayor, significantly less than the leadership condition ( $p < .001$ , Fisher's exact test). Similarly, the ratings data showed that participants blamed the mayor less in the voting condition ( $M = 3.15$ ,  $SD = 1.75$ ) than the leadership condition ( $M = 5.18$ ,  $SD = 1.37$ ),  $t(118) = 7.08$ ,  $p < .001$ .

Participants' open-ended comments provide insights into their decisions. In the leadership condition, participants who blamed the mayor pointed to obligations such as, "He is the mayor . . . in charge of protecting his citizens" and "The leader is ultimately responsible for everything that happens under his

administration." They also referred to capacity, for example, "Mr. Johnson could have prevented this, he chose not to." Participants who assigned less blame emphasized the mayor's reasons, for example, "The town needed to save money," and lack of control, for example, "He had no control over the weather."

In the voting condition, many participants blamed the voters in comments such as "The blame is on the voters," "The city as a whole is to blame," "The people are to blame themselves," "The people who voted are responsible," and "The town voted, therefore Mr. Johnson is in the clear." Participants who blamed the mayor pointed to obligations, for example, "He's the mayor and he is in charge . . . an important decision like this should not be up to a vote" and complained that the mayor "was passing the decision's responsibility off to the voting public."

## Discussion

The results of this experiment support the hypothesis that people blame leaders less for bad outcomes when they hold a vote rather than make an independent decision. The substantial shift in blame caused by voting is striking given previous research on politicians' excuses finding that attempting to shift responsibility can backfire (McGraw, 1990, 1991). Although these excuses were ineffective, the present results show that when used as a decision procedure, delegating responsibility reduces blame. This observation is consistent with ideas about intervening causes and agents. The implications for the path model of blame (Malle et al., this issue) depend on the requirements for causality. If the mayor's decision is deemed causal (like by legal definitions), then the findings contradict the path model's reliance on obligations and capacity because these factors are not affected by holding a vote.

## Experiment 2

We next examine the same storm situation from the politician's perspective. To test whether voting works as a counter-strategy, we need to observe both its effects on blame (Experiment 1) and whether leaders choose the strategy under threat of blame (Experiment 2). In the current experiment, participants take the role of the mayor deciding about reinforcing the wall. They choose to either decide independently or hold a vote at the town meeting. To manipulate the threat of blame, we vary whether the townspeople previously blamed or praised politicians for similar decisions in the past. The counterstrategy hypothesis predicts that participants will be more likely to hold a vote when there is greater threat of blame.

## Methods

We recruited 147 participants (41% female; age:  $M = 32.5$ ,  $SD = 9.7$ ) to complete a short study (<5 min) using MTurk. None of the participants failed the comprehension check or previously participated in a related study.

Participants read a fictional scenario in which they took the role of a politician making a decision about a town's preparations for a storm. Participants were randomly assigned to the previous-blame condition or the previous-praise condition. In the previous-blame condition, they read the following:

You are the Mayor of Brooktown. Your job is to make important decisions for the community. You are deciding whether to reinforce a wall to protect the town from flood waters caused by an impending storm. If the wall fails then the town will be severely damaged but reinforcing it is very costly and will put the town in debt. In the past, the townspeople have blamed politicians both for their storm preparations and also for their management of town funds. You can take a leadership role and make the final decision, or you can hold a vote at the town meeting and choose the option that receives the most votes. How will you decide what to do?

In the previous-praise condition, the scenario was identical except for a single word: the word "blamed" (in the fifth sentence) was replaced with "praised" to indicate that the townspeople praised their politicians' decisions in the past.

Participants answered a forced-choice question about how they would make the decision. They chose (a) "Leadership. Take a leadership role and make the final decision" or (b) "Voting. Hold a vote and choose the option that receives the most votes." Next, participants rated the appropriateness of each decision method on a 7-point scale from 1 (*very inappropriate*) to 7 (*very appropriate*). Participants could explain their decisions in a textbox and then answered demographic questions and a comprehension question.

## Results

In the blame condition, 67% of participants chose to hold a vote rather than make an independent decision. This is significantly greater than the praise condition in which 52% chose to hold a vote ( $p < .05$ , one-tailed, Fisher's exact test).

Turning to ratings of appropriateness, participants judged leadership to be less appropriate in the blame condition ( $M = 4.98$ ,  $SD = 1.60$ ) than in the praise condition ( $M = 5.55$ ,  $SD = 1.21$ ),  $t(145) = 2.43$ ,  $p < .05$ . In contrast, the appropriateness of voting did not differ between the blame condition ( $M = 5.48$ ,

$SD = 1.56$ ) and the praise condition ( $M = 5.27$ ,  $SD = 1.54$ ),  $t(145) = 0.81$ , *ns*. This observation suggests that in the blame condition, greater preference for voting in the forced-choice item was driven by a decrease in the preference for leadership when the risk of blame is high rather than blame directly increasing the preference for voting.

Looking at the comments, participants who favored leadership referred to obligations, for example, "I owe it to the people to make those decisions," "A leader is supposed to lead, not set everything to a vote," and "Holding a vote is equivalent to shirking my responsibility as mayor." They also emphasized the context of safety, for example, "Matters of safety should not be put to a vote," and time constraints such as the "need for immediate action." Participants who favored voting referred to representation, for example, "See what the people want" and "People should have input." Relevant to the blame hypothesis, participants saw voting as a way to avoid blame: "It will put less responsibility on me," "They'll have no one to blame but themselves," "By voting I would not be held accountable," and "Thinking as a politician it's kind of a lose/lose, so why not pass the buck on to the voters."

## Discussion

These results show that people in a leadership role are more likely to hold a vote when they are at greater risk of being blamed. This effect occurred with a very subtle manipulation of only one word in the scenario indicating prior blame or prior praise. We note that even with prior praise, participants likely viewed an approaching storm as a potential cause for blame. Nonetheless, this subtle difference in the threat of blame was enough to increase the preference for voting over leadership.

### Does Blame Help Explain Why Groups of People Vote?

Experiments 1 and 2 support the hypothesis that leaders ask groups to vote as a strategy to deflect blame from themselves. Experiment 1 found that participants attribute less blame to leaders who hold a vote compared to leaders who make an independent decision. Experiment 2 found that participants in a leadership role were more likely to hold a vote when facing greater threat of blame.

Of course, we do not think that avoiding blame is, or could be, the only function of voting. If it were, then constituents would take the obvious countermove: refuse to vote and require the leader to decide. Interestingly, this does sometimes occur, like when critics complained that Obama was shirking his

leadership duties by asking Congress to vote on a strike against Syria (Cupp, 2013). However, people often welcome opportunities to vote, and this suggests that voting can also benefit constituents, not only leaders.

We add that two seemingly obvious functions of voting do not stand up to scrutiny: information aggregation (Austen-Smith & Banks, 1996) and preference aggregation (Arrow, 1950). Standard majority-rule voting is not efficient at aggregating either information or preferences. The typical “one person, one vote” convention fails to account for voters’ confidences in information and their magnitudes of preferences. This might seem overly critical, but consider that honeybees are better at aggregating information than human voters. When choosing a nest site, the scout bees’ “votes” have magnitudes of confidence encoded by the number of waggles they perform, and their ultimate choice is determined by a finely tuned quorum rather than a simple majority (Seeley, 2010). Honeybees and similar examples force one of two conclusions: Either humans are worse than many social insects and other nonhumans at making group decisions, or else the functions of voting go beyond simple aggregation of information or preferences. We think the latter is more likely, although the missing functions for human voting remain elusive.

Importantly, these inefficiencies do not apply to leaders who use voting to reduce blame. A leader can successfully evade responsibility even if the group’s decisions are inefficient. Avoiding blame might be an important motivator for both formal and informal voting. In a variety of contexts from international summits to corporate board meetings to small committees, leaders might be more likely to hold a vote when they are at risk of blame. The same idea applies to personal contexts among friends and family. When one of the authors was asked by family to choose a restaurant for dinner, he promptly held a vote to avoid this responsibility.

The reach of blame into politics goes beyond voting. Weaver (1986) argued that the primary goal of politicians is avoiding blame rather than seeking praise or maximizing benefits to society. At the institutional level, the stability of governments depends on managing blame in a citizenry at levels below critical mass for a coordinated revolt. Processes of cultural evolution (Richerson & Boyd, 2005; Sperber & Hirschfeld, 2004) are expected to favor blame-resistant institutions that are more stable against crowds of finger-pointing citizens. For example, the election of leaders might make constituents feel complicit in the leader’s decisions, at least in the short term, diffusing blame away from politicians. The periodic rotation of leaders could prevent the accumulation of blame for repeated offenses while promising change in the near future, helping to keep outrage at tolerable

levels. The separation of powers might divide blame among different branches of government to avoid a concentration of hostility on any single office. In short, the psychology of blame might shape core components of modern democracy.

### The Evolved Function of Blame

The political arena suggests that leaders have an additional vulnerability to blame that can inform psychological theories. Politicians are often blamed no matter what they decide because different groups want different things (Weaver, 1986). Indeed, this is arguably the heart of politics: the struggle among different people’s competing preferences. Yet this observation does not fit with the assertion that the function of blame is to regulate “individual behaviors so they come in line with community interests” (Malle et al., this issue, p. 148). A crucial problem with the social regulation model is that community interests are not uniform but instead are frequently in stark conflict. Strictly interpreted, the social regulation model implies that people will blame individuals only when everyone in the community has the same interests. This is clearly not the case: Politicians are routinely blamed for decisions that many other people praise (invading other countries, providing health care, decriminalizing drugs, distributing contraception, etc.). This suggests that blame functions to advantage individuals or coalitions against other group members, at least as much as the whole community.

Evolutionary theories emphasize the importance of conflicting interests within groups. Living in large social groups tends to intensify both cooperation *and* conflict among individuals in the group (Humphrey, 1976; Krause & Ruxton, 2002; Whiten & Byrne, 1997). Other group members are helpful for cooperative hunting, vigilance against predators, and so on, but those same individuals are obstacles when everyone is vying for food, shelter, and other limited resources. Moreover, a few animal species including humans, chimpanzees, baboons, and hyenas have the ability to form coalitions within the group to better compete against other group members (de Waal, 1982; Harcourt, 1992; Holekamp, Sakai, & Lundrigan, 2007; Silk, 2002). Coalitions add layers of complexity as individuals form teams within teams to take what they want from other group members, all the while trying to preserve valuable cooperative relationships with the same competitors. Silk (2002) reviewed some striking examples from macaques, baboons, and vervet monkeys. In these species, groups have matrilineal dominance hierarchies in which individuals form coalitions with kin in order to compete with non-kin for resources (reminiscent of human royal families). But they also frequently fight with their own kin, in fact as

often as non-kin (Silk, 2002), illustrating the coexistence of cooperation and competition. Researchers have argued that balancing cooperation and conflict in large groups is so challenging that it caused the evolution of enlarged brains, specialized cognitive adaptations, and “Machiavellian” strategies in highly social species (Dunbar, 1996; Humphrey, 1976; Whiten & Byrne, 1997).

This evolutionary perspective suggests that blame is among the Machiavellian strategies and counter-strategies that humans use to simultaneously compete and cooperate with other group members. This helps explain the predicament of politicians: They are blamed not only when everyone agrees but also when a gain for some people is a loss for other group members. Leaders are caught in the crossfire between rival coalitions. The same situation happens in close relationships when a person is caught in the middle of a quarrel between friends or family. In these common trade-off situations, blame is inevitable.

The challenge for researchers is specifying how blame differs from other Machiavellian strategies. According to the path model (Malle et al., this issue), a central feature of blame is the requirement for warrant or evidence. If blame were exactly the same as coalitional allegiance, then people would not need evidence but would consider only their loyalties to the accuser and the accused. To explain warrant, we appeal to a functional theory of moral condemnation, the *dynamic coordination model* (DeScioli & Kurzban, 2013). Moral condemnation, like blame, shows high sensitivity to public evidence (DeScioli, Bruening, et al., 2011; DeScioli & Kurzban, 2013). The model explains this feature by focusing on the problem of coordination among condemners. It is costly to act alone to condemn someone because the person is likely to retaliate. It is much less costly if many other people condemn the same person. This means that condemners face a coordination problem. A good strategy in coordination games is for players to choose actions contingent on public information that is available to everyone (called *focal points*; Schelling, 1960). On this model, the requirement for warrant is a requirement for a public signal for coordination.

Further, the dynamic coordination model accounts for the coalitional background of condemnation. People do not condemn (or blame) in social vacuums but rather in complex networks of allegiances and loyalties. Humans are experts at forming teams to compete with other group members. But, like in the monkey species just mentioned (Silk, 2002), people also fight with their own teammates. To gain the upper hand against teammates, people can form alliances with individuals from other teams. The result of this hyperactive alliance building is a dense social network of cross-cutting ties. A feature of these networks is that

for any given dispute, many people will have ties to both sides and, critically, the number of supporters on each side will tend to be roughly equal (DeScioli & Kurzban, 2013). The literature on animal fighting in evolutionary biology shows that when fights are evenly matched they are more likely to escalate to costly fighting (Arnott & Elwood, 2009; Krebs & Davies, 1993; Mesterton-Gibbons, Gavrilets, Gravner, & Akçay, 2011; Parker, 1974). This implies that if people side with their friends, family, and coalitions in disputes, then fights will escalate and everyone will pay a high fighting cost.

Alliances make coordinating condemnation more difficult because they create *asymmetric payoffs*—players disagree on which coordination equilibrium is best (Schelling, 1960). Bystanders need to choose which fighter to support and which to condemn. But they each have different loyalties and so will often disagree. Nonetheless, they need to agree to avoid costly escalation. The solution is the same as before: Players need to use public signals and evidence to coordinate their condemnation decisions. Specifically, dynamic coordination theory holds that moral cognition guides bystanders to side against the disputant who chose the most morally wrong action. This allows people to choose sides based on the disputants’ actions rather than their identities which are tied up in alliances (DeScioli & Kurzban, 2013).

The coordination model holds that condemnation and blame rely on evidence not because people seek the facts per se but because the facts provide a unique source of coordination signals. This also suggests that when fictions are highly visible, public, and unique, they will readily rival facts in shaping condemnation and blame. This idea, again, fits well with the political arena in which prominent public fictions can be as potent as facts in shaping blame. It is also consistent with observations of condemnation based not on visible evidence but on fictional supernatural beliefs (Kurzban & DeScioli, 2009). For example, some evangelists blamed Hurricane Katrina on homosexual people and abortion advocates, arguing that they provoked divine retribution.

A coordination function can reconcile discrepancies between “blame-early” theories and models in which judgments about evidence, causality, intentions, and harm inform judgments of blame (reviewed in Malle et al., this issue). The coordination account suggests that people are motivated to blame and produce post hoc justifications (especially for enemies or suspicious strangers), but only up to a point. If moral reasoning were entirely motivated, then it would not achieve coordination because everyone would support their own allies. Coordination requires impartiality, or at least a convincing appearance of impartiality (Shaw, 2013). People are expected to be biased insofar as they can persuade the adversary’s allies to

switch sides, but no further or they risk escalated conflict.

A coordination function also helps explain why an intervening agent reduces blame. By creating an alternative target, an intervening agent can deflect or disrupt coordination among condemners. In principle, people could blame multiple targets independently. Instead, however, blame can be shifted such that greater blame for one person relieves blame from someone else. This characteristic can be understood as a strategic constraint on coordination that requires condemners to converge on the same target for blame.

Theories of condemnation can account for some features of blame but perhaps not all of them. As pointed out by Malle et al. (this issue), blame is not the same as moral wrongness. Very roughly, blame applies to a larger set of behaviors with unintended consequences. According to the path model, information processing is bifurcated at the intentional/unintentional junction leading to two distinct branches for computing blame (Malle et al., this issue). Moreover, Darley and Pittman (2003) identified a fundamental difference in the outputs for intended and unintended outcomes. Namely, unintended violations cause a desire for compensation of the victim, whereas intended violations lead to desires for both compensation and also for retribution.

The desire for compensation in response to blame stands out because there are few, if any, functional theories about it. This contrasts with punishment for which there are many evolutionary theories (reviewed in DeScioli & Kurzban, 2009b). Reciprocity theories do not straightforwardly explain compensation for unintended harms. Moreover, unlike reciprocity and other forms of cooperation, compensation does not increase efficiency because there are no gains in trade. Compensation is a simple transfer, and there seems to be no requirement that the compensated individual benefits more than the person who compensates them. Further theorizing is needed but some possible explanations for compensation include partner choice (Aktipis, 2011), risk pooling (Aktipis, Cronk, & de Aguiar, 2011; Kaplan, Schniter, Smith, & Wilson, 2012), fairness (Shaw, 2013; Shaw, DeScioli, & Olson, 2012; Shaw & Olson, 2012, 2014), and property rights (DeScioli & Wilson, 2011).

The distinctiveness of compensation motives suggests that they are unique to blame. In contrast, punitive motives seem better accounted for by moral condemnation. Adding to the complexity, it is possible that people not only desire compensation but also moralize it and condemn people who fail to compensate. In general, people are capable of moralizing an incredible diversity of behaviors (Haidt, 2012), including political behaviors (Ryan, 2014). This makes it difficult to separate moral cognition from

the many social behaviors upon which it lays judgment (DeScioli & Kurzban, 2009b, 2013) and compensation might be another example of this issue.

### Challenges for Psychological Theories of Blame

Many challenges remain for psychological theories of blame. We point out some issues raised by the path model (Malle et al., this issue). First, the path model asserts that blame is a type of moral judgment but also concedes that blame differs from wrongness. People are blamed for amoral behaviors such as a quarterback who throws an interception and loses a football game. This suggests that blame importantly differs from morality.

Second, theories of blame require well-specified functions that can account for its information-processing structure. Theories about the evolved functions of cognitive mechanisms must meet the requirements of adaptationist analysis (Williams, 1966). They need to show an improbable fit between the structure of the mechanism and the adaptive problem it is hypothesized to solve. They should distinguish functions from byproducts and fortuitous effects. These types of functional theories are particularly well developed in biomechanics (DeScioli, 2010; Vogel, 2009), probably because the human mind is good at understanding the functions of anatomical structures due to an evolutionary history of mechanical tool use. In contrast, humans are much worse at understanding the functions of computational architectures. Humans understand mental activity by using an intuitive dualism (Bloom, 2009) that separates the mind from the physical world. This makes it difficult for laypeople and researchers to understand how to formulate and test functional hypotheses for information-processing architectures with the same rigor as more obvious anatomical structures. In the context of blame, a proposed function of social regulation is too generic to make useful predictions. Social regulation could include virtually any social behavior. As in evolutionary biology (Maynard Smith, 1982), the tools of game theory are essential for articulating the strategic functions of human social behavior in sufficient detail to make testable predictions about psychological systems.

Third, the path model claims that blame requires warrant, whereas anger and wrongness do not. Although the authors support this claim by pointing to moral dumbfounding (Haidt, 2001), dumbfounding shows that people strive to justify their wrongness judgments, not that warrant doesn't apply. It seems more likely that people expect justifications for many social judgments and for different reasons.

Fourth, the path model claims that people only blame agents and not impersonal forces. But people routinely blame impersonal entities like alcohol for

car accidents, heart failure for deaths, rain for reduced profits, and flat tires for being late.

Fifth, the path model does not specify how causality is perceived and represented. This seems critical because causality is the first step in the model. Similarly, we are uncertain how the model accounts for the distinction between means and side effects (Knobe, 2005; Mikhail, 2007), and whether in the causality or intention component.

Sixth, the path model argues that people seek reasons for intentional offenses but not for unintentional violations. But it seems that people also consider reasons for unintended outcomes. For example, people wanted to know why the governor of Georgia failed to prepare Atlanta for an ice storm (in January 2014), and they thought it was important that he was sleeping when the weather warning was issued, that is, he had no good reason.

Seventh, the path model holds that capacity tends to increase blame. However, it seems that people are also blamed for incompetence. Returning to the sports example, athletes are blamed for falling short of the abilities fans want. That is, in the competence domain, less capacity seems to increase rather than decrease blame. Related, people try to reduce blame by portraying moral violations as incompetence (e.g., “mistakes were made”; Tavris & Aronson, 2007). Also, apologies work better than denial for incompetence, but the reverse is true for moral violations (Kim, Ferrin, Cooper, & Dirks, 2004). These observations raise questions about how blame for incompetence differs from intentional and negligent violations.

Last, the path model involves computing the degree of blame. We are curious about why blame has magnitudes (if it does) rather than only denoting who is to blame, and further, how these magnitudes are used in social interactions. This issue was previously addressed for magnitudes of moral wrongness (DeScioli & Kurzban, 2013), which contrasts with other types of judgments that are categorical or binary like grammaticality judgments.

### Conclusion

The present experiments provide evidence that leaders delegate decisions to a group vote to deflect blame. Experiment 1 found reduced blame for a politician who asked townspeople to vote on storm preparations compared to a politician who decided independently. Experiment 2 found that participants anticipate this effect when taking the leader’s perspective: When there was greater threat of blame, participants were more likely to propose a vote rather than decide independently. These results inform the psychology of blame as well as a less studied issue—

the psychology of group voting. Future research can test additional functions of voting, particularly functions that benefit voters rather than only leaders. Similarly, additional functional theories are needed for the psychology of blame. We suggest that the desire for compensation (Darley & Pittman, 2003) is a critical feature distinguishing blame from moral condemnation and can provide clues about its functions. By leveraging both psychology and politics, future research can uncover the Machiavellian strategies that make up the human blame game.

### Note

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### Acknowledgments

We thank Maxim Massenkoff, Jason Nemirow, Tim Ryan, and Alex Shaw for helpful comments on this article.

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