Blaming Europe? Citizens, Governments and the Media

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Suggested hashtag for Twitter users: #LSEHobolt
Blaming Europe?
Citizens, Governments and the Media

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Blaming Europe?
Questions

1) How do citizens assign blame to the European Union?
2) Do the media and governments shift blame to the EU?
3) Can citizens hold the EU to account for policy outcomes?
Attribution and Accountability

“Democracy is the process by which people choose the man who'll get the blame.”
- Bertrand Russell
How do citizens assign blame?

- **Institutional reality versus individual biases?**
- Attribution of blame should reflect the division of responsibility across levels of government
  - Especially when information is available
- But citizens also rely on in-group biases (EU attitudes)
  - Selective attribution of blame: Europhiles absolve the EU of blame, whereas Eurosceptics blame the EU for poor performance
How do citizens assign blame?

- Institutional divisions of responsibilities
- Policy performance

1. Information
2. Attribution of responsibility to the EU

Attitudes towards the EU
Who is responsible?

Source: European Election Studies 2009 (N=27,000)
Responsibility for interest rates

Source: European Election Studies 2009 (N=27,000) & Survey of EU experts
Impact of media coverage on the EU

- When do citizens get it right?

![Bar chart showing the impact of media coverage on the EU, with axes labeled Closeness to expert assignment on the economy, TV EU visibility, and Newspaper EU visibility.](chart.png)

Source: European Election Studies 2009 & European Media Study 2009
Responsibility for the financial crisis (UK)

Source: British Election Study, 2008-2012
Responsibility for the economy (UK)

% think affects the economy the most

- EU or both
- Just British government
- Neither

Source: British Election Study, 2004-2012
Blaming the EU for economic problems

Selective attribution of blame in the crisis

Source: PEW survey data 2011
Selective attribution of blame for the crisis (UK)

Source: British Election Study
Summary:
How do citizens assign blame?

- Citizens’ attribution of responsibility to the EU reflects the institutional and political context
- More blame of the EU as the euro crisis has unfolded
- Newspaper consumption makes citizens better able to assign responsibility, and high levels of media coverage reduces biases
- Selective attribution: blame also driven by attitudes towards the EU
The Blame Game?

- To what extent do national governments and the national media assign blame to the EU?
Media blame attribution for the economy

Assignment of responsibility for the economy, 2009

Source: European Media Study 2009 (N=36,000 stories)
The Crisis: who is credited by governments?

Source: Content analysis of all PM speeches on the economy, 2008-2012
The Crisis: who is **blamed** by governments?

Source: Content analysis of all PM speeches on the economy, 2008-2012
Summary: Who do the media and governments blame?

- The media covers the EU, but policy-specific coverage is less common, and attribution of responsibility to the EU is rare.

- Heads of Governments very rarely blame the EU, even during the crisis. Instead we find:
  - **Diffusion of responsibility** – joint European responsibility ("we are all in this together")
  - **Credit taking** – national governments claiming credit for policy outcomes
Can citizens hold the EU to account for policy outcomes?

- **Accountability:**
  - Punishing or rewarding governments for policy outcomes that is their responsibility
  - Greater performance voting when there is “clarity of responsibility” ~ identifiable government
Accountability in a national context

The economy moves from bad to good

Source: European Election Studies 2009 (N=27,000)
Accountability in European elections

Source: European Election Studies 2009 (N=27,000)
Effect on trust in the EU

Source: European Election Studies 2009 (N=27,000)
Summary:
Can citizens hold the EU to account?

- There is no evidence that citizens punish or rewards MEPs for performance that the EU is deemed to be responsible for:
  - The EU lacks a clearly identifiable “government party” in the EP that voters can punish and reward
  - No clear link between the European Parliament vote and EU executive

- However, when citizens blame the EU for poor performance that leads to lower levels of trust in EU institutions
Implications

- Lack of mechanisms for accountability in the EU
- Reduced accountability for national governments
- Consequences for the legitimacy of the EU
- Aggravated by the crisis
Possible solutions to accountability deficit

- Greater institutional clarity
  - Clearer divisions of competences

- Greater government clarity
  - Government-Opposition politics in the European Parliament
  - Stronger link between parliamentary majority and the Commission or a directly elected Commission President

- Greater transparency to make it more difficult for national politicians to diffuse blame/claim credit

“A fundamental deepening of the EMU must go hand in hand with greater democratic legitimacy. Wherever new competences are created at European level or closer coordination of national policies is established, full democratic control has to be ensured.”

Future of Europe Group (EU Foreign Ministers), 17 Sep 2012
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