Regulating Public Space

When a children's playground turns into a hangout for smoking joints
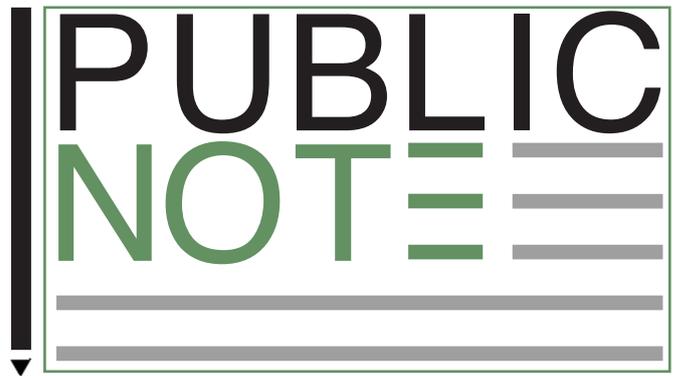
PUBLIC NOTE

Book review

Reviewed by De Krijger, F. M. Utrecht School of Governance (USG). The Netherlands.

As a resident of the marvelous city of Amsterdam, I cycle past the Mercator square in De Baarsjes district on a weekly basis. At first glance, this area does not stand out in any particular way: just like many other squares in the Dutch capital, it is home to shops and restaurants, it has several benches to sit on to enjoy the sun, and it serves as a tram stop for many passengers daily. However, what I did not know before reading this book was that in 2006, a ban on using soft drugs was established in this area. This ban aimed to prevent the nuisances caused by the local soft drugs users, and could be considered as the catalyst of a wave of local bans across the Netherlands (81 in total). Playing It by the Rules teaches us that behind these seemingly simple and clear-cut measurements is hidden a fascinating world of the public 'production' of space and the multilayered social responses to local by-laws. Chevalier's aim in this impressive study is to understand the emergence and effects of these local bans on soft drugs and to unravel the social structures underlying these processes. On a more theoretical level, she endeavors to understand what happens in the behavior and minds of people when municipalities attempt to regulate public space.

Key words: book review, public space, urban ethnography

Floris de Krijger
Book review of D.A. M Chevalier (2015)

In *part one*, Chevalier provides the information necessary to understand and evaluate her empirical chapters. First, she briefly describes the policy context in which soft drug bans are situated (*Ch. 2*). For a long time, the Netherlands was known to be Europe's 'odd man out' because of its exceptionally liberal policy regarding soft drugs. However, this policy discourse has recently started to shift: whereas emphasis was previously placed on the health of soft drug users, concern with public nuisance are now regarded as more important. The increased adoption of these public bans can be considered a consequence of this general development. After this contextualization, Chevalier elaborates on her qualitative research strategy (*Ch. 3*). With the use of ethnographic methods, she investigated the following three soft drugs bans in-depth: a ban in a playground in the inner-city of Amsterdam, a ban in a neighborhood shopping square in a suburb of the provincial town Tilburg, and a ban in a central square in the old fishing town of Spakenburg. In each case, a different rationale – as found in a preliminary survey – prevailed in making the case for installing the ban: respectively, nuisance related to a specific site, nuisance related to specific social group, and nuisance related to the use of soft drugs themselves. With this selection of cases, she attempted to create maximum variation of possible justifications for individual bans and subsequently sought cases that seemed representative for of each different category.

In *part two,* Chevalier offers a remarkably rich and contextualized description of the three case studies (*Ch.4*). In Amsterdam, the ban was situated in a neighborhood that was previously characterized by a large blue-collar population, but, owing to a quick gentrification process, has recently became more popular among 'yuppies'. As a result of this development, the old working class identity of the neighborhood has begun to fade away rapidly. In Tilburg, the ban was instituted in a completely different area with an opposite development trajectory. This post-war neighborhood was originally built for the lower and 'normal' middle class of ethnic Dutch residents. However, since the 1990s the prosperous residents moved out, allowing for a an influx of many less privileged people, often with a non-Western ethnic background. Lastly, in the town of Spakenburg the ban was established in a homogeneous community of protestant Christians. In this area, nuisance related to soft drugs usage was not present and the ban enacted as a form of prevention. In the three cases, the disparate qualities and histories of the physical and social environments conveyed a multitude of voices laying claims to the spaces at hand and the perception of nuisance related to soft drugs use.

Part three is structured in theoretical terms and covers topics related to the production of space (*Ch.5*), the codification of social norms (*Ch.6*) and the public responses to legal measures (*Ch.8*). In these chapters, Chevalier raises her empirical explanations to a more abstract level and engages them in a fascinating (and sometimes conflictual) dance with existing theories. The overarching question is how the regulation of public space by means of legal interventions relates to (and influences) the process of space making. Building on the work of Lefebvre (1974), she explains that 'space' is made up of planned, lived, and perceived dimensions. The planned environment encompasses idea(l)s about the function and use of a space. The lived dimension concerns the expression of these ideas in practice. The perceived environment signifies the symbolic meaning people ascribe to their surroundings. Chevalier demonstrates that social frictions in and around public space often occur when these three dimensions are not sufficiently aligned. For example, this occurs when a group of adolescents consider a children's playground as a convenient spot to hang out (perceived space) and decide to use one of the slides as their standard bench for smoking joints (lived space). This practice runs counter to the original purpose of the playground, namely a safe place for children to play (planned space). In the book, 'moral entrepreneurs' (p.14) hoped that by making changes in the planned environment - namely, banning soft drugs in a particular

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public space - the desired changes in the lived dimension and the perceived dimension would follow. However, in practice, this appears to have often not been the case. This is because all the investigated spaces figured prominently in the everyday lives of the people who used them and had thereby created feelings of 'emotional ownership' over these spaces (p.209). For these people, these public 'spaces' had turned into 'places', since they had functioned as sites for physical, social and personal experiences. Local residents thus felt as if they had the legitimate authority to control these spaces. Simultaneously, their conception of ownership generated a sense of place-related responsibility and civic engagement. Chevalier explains that the bans often generated dismissive behavior and active resistance because these measurements were perceived as an infringement on people's feelings of emotional ownership. She concludes by saying that the social struggles around the installment of soft drugs bans reflect a contentious process in which public space is produced. This process is comparable to a game that has winners and losers and that, in turn, has players who try to change the rules of the game and players who do not adhere to the rules. From both a theoretical and empirical point of view, this book is very convincing. The topic Chevalier investigated is utterly complex, but her analysis remains easy to follow. In particular, the original concept of 'emotional ownership' seems to

be a useful theoretical contribution to the field. With regards to her empirical strategy, Chevalier uses an ethnographic eye, allowing her to disentangle the deeper meanings that underpin the daily habits and rituals of public life. Her observation notes are vividly written and reflect her great sense of detail, reading at points almost like a novel.

Above all, Chevalier must be praised because of her sophisticated multidisciplinary approach. In her analysis, she employs theories from urban sociology, criminology and the sociology of law. These theories serve as different lenses for understanding the phenomenon of local bans. Whereas multidisciplinary studies often provide multiple yet relatively autonomous explanations for a particular phenomenon, Chevalier's approach is more refined. The different theoretical lenses she uses are complementary and mutually reinforcing. For example, to understand how the local bans 'landed' in the different communities she combines the literature on rule compliance with work done in the field of space making. It appears that the social recognition and valuation for the law worked in tandem with the overall production of space. In other words, changes in the planned dimension of space appeared to be unsuccessful in changing behavior in, and perception about, a public space if the users did not respect the authority of the law in the first place. In these cases, the ban only heightened social tensions rather than mitigating them. This synergetic use of different theories is so apparently successful because she manages to bring these completely different theories in line with her own ontological standpoint. This prevented her from deteriorating into the contradictory assumptions of theses disciplines and enabled her to use the theories as a means to deepen her analysis and focus her observations.

However, this book does have its missed chances and shortcomings. The first one involves the relation between her case selection and her empirical chapters. As explained, Chevalier selected her cases purposefully, whereby the rationales behind the installment of the bans served as the leading selection criterion. This practice assumes that these different rationales could

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have had an influence on the social mechanisms that were at play. However, in her empirical chapters, she does not take this possibility into account and neglects to differentiate between the different cases in a consequent manner, choosing instead to structure them around three theoretical topics. Although this strategy still plays out well, it would have been insightful if she had discussed to what extent the discovered mechanisms functioned differently in every ban-type case. In my reading, such a relation seems to have existed. For example, whether a ban was installed because of nuisance related to a specific group (Tilburg) or as a result of a general rejection of soft drugs (Spakenburg) seems to have influenced the way the notion of 'emotional ownership' played out locally. In Tilburg, the ban was primarily directed towards a specific group, namely Somali and Moroccan immigrants. Consequently, this group took the ban quite personally, thereby reinforcing their feelings of 'emotional ownership' and, with them, the forcefulness of their reaction ('[T]his is our place, were are not leaving. We fight back' p. 179). Contrarily, in Spakenburg, a fierce social struggle around the enactment of the ban was absent, potentially because there the measure was not directed towards a specific group but towards druWgs in general. An avenue for further research would be to trace back the influence of this target group's immigrant background on the production of space. Perhaps in this case, the sentiment 'we do not want drugs to be present here' also came to stand for 'immigrants are not welcome here' or even 'immigrants are not welcome in this country'.

Second, Chevalier has neglected to include an explicit reflection on the social relevance of this study. This seems a missed chance, since her empirical data definitely has societal value. In her epilogue, she states that the aim of her book was not to evaluate whether these bans worked, but rather how these bans worked. Therefore, she refrained from giving any concrete remarks about the desirability of these bans and the elements

that constitute 'good' space (p.215). The only guidance she provides for practitioners is that 'the game' of the production of space should be 'transparent' and 'comprehensive'. Only when adhering to these values, this game - to stick to Chevalier's idiom - could be considered as 'fair play' (p.212). These remarks leave the reader a little empty-handed and elicit further clarifying questions like: 'how should we interpret this advocacy for transparency and comprehensiveness?' and 'who is responsible for executing this; the municipality or the different social groups themselves?'. Given the ethnographic nature of her research and the accompanying ontological assumptions, the absence of a detailed strategy for action seems understandable and justified. However, there are certainly other approaches for improving the social relevance of research that she did not incorporate in the book either. For example, she could have related her finding to the broader societal debate about how processes of immigration and gentrification have drastically changed the street-scene in many urban areas. Many city residents, of diverse ethnic backgrounds, have started to feel alienated from their living environments. This, because the unknown cultures that new residence bring along have drastically changed the visual make-up of many neighborhoods. In certain respects, this study relates to this debate and teaches us how these feelings of alienation become activated and from where they originate. Moreover, it shows how these impressions inform our behavior in public spaces.

To conclude, *Playing it by the Rules* is an interesting book that has definitely deepened our understanding of the social struggles that arise from the regulation of public spaces. It teaches us that public space is something subjective that is produced by people and therefore not easily or exhaustively re-shaped by legal interventions. The next time I cycle past the Mercatorplein, I will apprehend that that behind every bench, a complex web of planned, lived and perceived space is hidden. If I decide to take a rest on one of them, I now realize that - in addition to soaking up the sun - I am, in a small way, engaging in the quarrelsome and fascinating process of public space production.

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Science as a Discursive Weapon for Effective Blame Avoidance?

Disentangling Citizens' Attitudes Towards Welfare-State Retrenchment

PUBLIC NOTE

Many governments enacting welfare reforms deploy blame avoidance strategies in order to prevent electoral punishment. However, it is yet unclear when and under which conditions blame avoidance strategies actually work. This study employed an online survey experiment to examine how perceptual blame avoidance strategies influence the attitudes of Dutch citizens about a Danish policy reform. More specifically, we assessed if citizens become more positive about welfare state retrenchment if politicians frame these measures as inevitable and reinforce their message with scientific evidence. Our findings demonstrate that this specific type of perceptual blame avoidance does not have a positive effect on the attitudes of our respondents. This is not surprising, since the respondents were generally positive about the reforms – rendering blame avoidance strategies superfluous. This study cast doubt on Paul Pierson's New Politics Thesis and raises new questions about the inter-welfare state solidarity among citizens.

Keywords: blame avoidance, welfare state retrenchment, comparative policy reform, framing, scientific knowledge, experiment

Floris de Krijger & Bouwe Meijer

It has long been assumed that governments are hesitant to reform the welfare state due to the fear to be electorally punished. The underlying logic of this so-called New Politics Thesis is that welfare cuts are generally unpopular among citizens, which may eventually decrease political support (Pierson, 1994). Even though many citizens are in favor of lowering public spending and taxes, this enthusiasm quickly turns into skepticism when it pertains to programs that may affect them directly (Levy, 2010). Reforms can thus be considered electorally risky. Nonetheless, existing literature demonstrates that Pierson's claim does not hold empirically: governments that do enact welfare cuts are not always electorally punished (Vis, 2009; Vis, 2016; Wenzelburger & Hörisch, 2016). In fact, retrenchment may even provide the governments with credit-claiming opportunities (Bonoli, 2012; Elmelund-Præstekær & Emmenegger, 2013; Davidsson & Marx, 2013)

One explanation for this puzzling finding is that electoral punishment is prevented by blame avoidance strategies – i.e. strategies that governments use to avoid the electoral blame for a potentially unpopular policy reform. These blame avoidance strategies can be categorized into three types: manipulating procedures, manipulating payoffs and manipulating perceptions (Vis, 2016). The former is concerned with avoiding blame for unpopular reforms by altering the procedures of policy making – for instance by delegating the decisions to another institution that can be blamed instead. Payoffs can be manipulated by changing the gains and losses of a welfare cut. For example, politicians can draft reforms that affect groups that are unlikely to mobilize in order to decrease the chances of punishment. Lastly, a government can change the perceptions of those affected by the reform, which is usually achieved by framing the reform in a particular way.

This article examines how governments avoid the blame for unpopular reforms by manipulating perceptions. The main reason to focus on perceptions is that this strategy is ubiquitous in the political debate. Compared to manipulating procedures or payoffs, influencing the salience of negative consequences is relatively simple for politicians: they merely need to frame an issue in a particular way, instead of tinkering with procedures or changing the affected groups. Moreover, these 'issue frames' can be employed for many program types and reforms.

Although theories of blame avoidance provide a missing link between welfare cuts and the non-occurrence of electoral punishment, this link has not been clearly established. The scant empirical evidence only indicates that the non-occurrence of electoral punishment can be explained by blame avoidance (McGraw, 1991; Slothuus, 2007; Wenzelburger, 2014; Wenzelburger & Hörisch, 2016). However, it is yet unclear 'when and why a blame avoidance strategy that manipulated perceptions is successful' (Vis, 2016, p. 129). The few studies that have focused on conditional factors did not target aspects specifically related to frames. Instead, the emphasis has been put on macro-level factors, such as economic conditions (e.g. Vis, 2009; Goerres, Karlsen, & Kumlin, 2015) or the choice of retrenchment strategy (e.g. Elmelund-Præstekær & Klitgaard, 2012). The only exception is an experimental study of Slothuus (2007), in which the persuasiveness of the frame was examined by portraying recipients as either deserving or not deserving the benefits.

This lack of knowledge of conditions that constitute successful blame avoidance calls for incorporating such conditions. Therefore, we include scientific knowledge as a moderating variable. Multiple studies have suggested that the actual framing effect depends on the persuasiveness of the frame (e.g. Brewer, 2001; Chong & Druckman, 2007). If the quality of the frame is raised, for instance because it comes from a high-credibility source, the frame may be more persuasive (Druckman, 2001). Arguably, this is also the case with deploying scientific knowledge. Science is often thought to be a relatively objective form of knowledge, since it is concerned with how the world actually is, rather than how the world ought to be (Douglas, 2009). As a consequence, science is imbued with a sense of objectivity that can legitimize contentious political reforms – it gives political decisions an apolitical connotation (Stone, 2012). It is plausible that this hint of objectivity influences the effect of a blame avoidance strategy. The central research question of this article reads:

Do perceptual blame avoidance strategies influence the attitudes of citizens, and to what extent is this relationship strengthened by the deployment of scientific knowledge?

An internet experiment is employed to study the causal link between blame avoidance and attitudes of citizens. Experiments are well-equipped to answer this question because few methodological approaches come as close to drawing reliable causal inferences as experiments.

Furthermore, the answer to the research question is highly *important in our time. Science is increasingly used as a* tool of politics: it has a major role in decision-making and the development of policies, but its influence on democratic processes remains unclear (Pielke Jr., 2003; Stone, 2012; Bolsen, Druckman, Cook, 2014; Druckman & Bolsen, 2011). This study contributes to this gap in the literature by assessing the persuasiveness of scientific knowledge.

1. Theoretical Framework

1.1 Blame avoidance and welfare state retrenchment

Within policy studies, Weaver (1986) was the first to analyze blame avoidance in a systematic manner. In his interpretation, politicians are inclined to engage in blame avoiding behavior only when they take unpopular decisions, but neglect to claim credit for popular ones. This asymmetry could be explained by the so called 'negativity bias' of constituencies: voters tend to be more sensitive to losses than to gains. To put it differently: 'voters are more sensitive to what has done to them than to what has been don for them' (Weaver, 1986, p. 373). Pierson (1994) further explained the electoral riskiness of welfare state reforms by referring to the cost and benefit distribution underlying these policies. Accordingly, retrenchment measures are hard to implement because the benefits of these allowances are concentrated among a small group of citizens whereas the costs are widely distributed (see also, Wilson, 1973). For instance, while cutting welfare payments directly decreases the purchasing power of the affected citizens, the improved public finance that emerges from it is not benefiting any electoral groups in particular.

For politicians, these electoral dynamics often give rise to the following dilemma: on the one hand, they need to act decisive and implement unpopular policies that eventually will contribute to the 'public good'. On the other hand, politicians will not be able to pursue other long-term policy objectives if enacting disliked public policies precludes them from becoming re-elected (Weaver, 1986). A factor that complicates this situation even further is that electoral punishment is also likely to occur if neglecting to reform welfare policies eventually result in economic stagnation (Lewis-Beck, 1988; Powell, & Whitten, 1993). To overcome this quandary, politicians often try to avoid the blame that the enacted

unpopular policy reform generates. Wenzelburger (2014) refined this mechanism by pointing out that politicians turn to blame avoidance strategies because they assume that welfare state reform elicits popular discontent. Blame avoidance strategies are thus so widely used because politicians' behavior is dictated by their subjective expectation of electoral risk, rather than the actual chance of becoming punished.

1.2 A framing strategy of blame avoidance

Recall that we focus on blame avoidance strategies in which politicians aim to change citizens' perception about a reform proposal (Vis, 2016). Politicians try to frame the proposal in such a way that citizens evaluate the rationale for the reform more positively or assess its consequences less far-reaching. Several types of framing strategies are distinguished in the literature. For instance, politicians could try to justify the retrenchment by referring to diminishing financial viability of the welfare state (Goerres, et al., 2015; Green-Pedersen, 2002) or by questioning whether certain recipients deserve their benefits (Slothuus, 2007). Another common discursive strategy is to treat a lower administrative level, previous government or any other third entity as a scapegoat and blame the cutbacks on their negligent behavior (Weaver, 1986; Wenzelburger, 2014).

Policy scholars turn to the general framing literature to understand why perceptual blame avoidance strategies are effective in altering citizens' attitudes. After all, politicians who employ perceptual blame avoidance strategies are in essence trying to craft the attitudes of citizens by strategically framing the reform at hand (Slothuus, 2007; Wenzelburger & Hörisch, 2015; Goerres, et. al, 2015). Entman (1993) explains that framing encompasses two elements: selection and salience. Hence, framing means 'to select aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as the promote problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation' (p. 52). If framing actually alters citizens' attitude or opinion about a certain issue scholars speak of a 'framing effect' (Nelson, et al., 1997). Thus, perceptual blame avoidance strategies are efficacious in changing citizens' attitudes if this 'framing' effect occurs. This raises the questions: why does framing influences opinion formation and under which conditions is a framing effect more likely to occur?

Building on insights from social-psychology Chong & Druckman (2007a) explained that framing effects are likely to take place if a frame is available, accessible and applicable to an individual. First, a frame is considered to be available if an individual is able to understand the content of the message that is being articulated. For example, in times of economic downturn politicians often justify welfare state reform by stating that the current welfare state arrangement has become financially untenable. This framing strategy will only be effective if citizens understand the connection between the state of the economy and the tenability of generous social benefits. Second, a framing effect increases if a message is cognitively accessible. With this criterion, they meant that a frame must feel familiar to an individual and needs to be recognized in order bring about an effect. For instance, when a politician blames the necessity to reform on mismanagement of the preceding government, this will influence citizens' attitudes if this message is accessible in an individual's memory. To increase the accessibility of a frame, politicians often repeat their message over and over again. Thirdly, a frame is applicable when it is compelling for the issues at hand and rhetorically persuasive. Not every frame is convincing in relation to a certain issue. For example, if a politician tries to build support for reforms, a reference to domestic problems such as an aging population or an inefficient bureaucratic apparatus seems more compelling than a remark about the general policy trend in neighboring welfare states.

Applying these insights to our study, we expect that politicians are able to influence citizens' attitudes about a proposed welfare state reform through framing. An assumption underlying this expectation is that citizens do not like to think deeply about complex political problems and are therefore susceptible to refined elite communication (Lau, et al. 1991). Hence, politicians enjoy a considerable amount of leeway to steer opinion formation into a certain direction and manipulate the attitudes about reform proposals. Hitherto, some studies have found that perceptual blame avoidance strategies could directly affect citizens' attitudes (Slothuus, 2007; Wenzelburger, 2014; Wenzelburger & Hörisch). In this article, we will test whether this finding replicable in a different context: the Netherlands. Our first hypotheses reads:

H1: The use of perceptual blame avoidance strategies will positively influence citizens' attitude towards welfare state retrenchment through framing.

1.3 Scientific knowledge and perceptual blame avoidance

In modern democracies, politicians recurrently refer to experts, facts, or scientific evidence as a strategy to increase the persuasiveness of their political message. Nelson & Oxley (1999) explained that this practice is also prevailing when it comes to communication and debates about welfare state reforms. Politicians who favor welfare state retrenchment not only motivate their standpoints with ideological arguments – such as the ideal of a small government – but also fight many of their battles on more factual grounds.

Stone (2012) compellingly disentangles the rationale behind the usage of science in political communication. Science has the ability to give a political decision and a-political connotation and is therefore often used as an instrument to resolve political conflict ('let the facts speak for themselves'). Using scientific knowledge to motivate policy reform potentially makes proposed measures appear as more substantiated, thorough and trustworthy –especially among those citizen with high levels of trust in science (Bolsen, et al., 2014). According to Stone (2012) referencing scientific evidence is most effective in persuading an audience if this information is embodied in numerical data. After all, numbers – to borrow Stone's idiom – impart an 'aura of expertise and authority' and symbolize 'precision, accuracy and objectivity' in our western culture (p. 191, 197). Following this line of reasoning, we could expect that public opinion about welfare state retrenchment will become less negative when politicians support the necessity of unpopular decision with scientific evidence. Our second hypothesis reads:

H2: Blame avoidance strategies that aim to alter citizen' perceptions are more successful if the posed arguments are backed by scientific evidence.

2. Methods

2.1 Setting and context

The experiment revolved around a policy reform that was actually initiated in Denmark in 2013. The respondents read a news article about a proposal from the Danish government to reduce the duration of unemployment benefits from four to two years. To

prevent priming the respondents towards a certain hypothesis, the instruction outlined that the experiment examined how people formed their opinion of the welfare state. The decision to include a Danish case was underpinned by three reasons. Firstly, it decreased the risk of a prior knowledge bias because Dutch citizens are not too familiar with Danish politics. Previous research indicates that the framing effect will increase if citizens possess prior knowledge about a certain topic (Druckman & Nelson, 2003). Familiarity enhances this effect because it increases the likelihood that the features emphasized in the frame are available and accessible for the individual (see §2.2). Choosing Denmark enabled us to control for this bias and isolate the direct effect of perceptual blame avoidance more accurately. Secondly, Denmark and the Netherlands share important characteristics: both countries have extensive welfare states and they went through more or less the same economic developments (Green-Pedersen, 2002). This ensured that the respondents could still relate to the reforms in general, despite their lack of knowledge on the specific Danish welfare cuts. Thirdly, previous literature indicated that Denmark has been particularly successful in applying blame avoidance strategies (Cox, 2001; Green-Pedersen, 2002). This enhanced the ecological validity (i.e. the realism of the setting) of our study.

The software program Qualtrics was used to conduct an online survey experiment. This method benefits from the strengths of both methodological traditions: surveys are generally strong on external validity (Bryman, 2012) while experiments have a high degree of internal validity (Blom-Hansen, Morton, & Serritzlew, 2015). Hence, it was possible to make reliable causal inferences without harming the external validity of the results (see for reflection on the external validity of this study §3.4). Moreover, conducting the experiment online enhanced the 'mundane realism' of the experiment, because many young people – a cohort ubiquitous in our study – get their news from online sources. A recent study found that 74% of the adults between 18 and 34 consume their news online (Schlachter, 2009). In other words, reading the news articles online reflected the way people actually follow the news.

2.2   Experimental procedure

The experiment employs a basic between-subjects design, with three different groups: a control group that only read factual information about the reforms, without a blame avoidance strategy (CG), a group that received a blame avoidance strategy supplemented with a general motivation for welfare cuts (TG1), and a group that read a news article with a blame avoidance strategy that was supported by scientific knowledge (TG2). The general motivation for welfare retrenchment in the second group was added to rule out the possibility that any motivation increases the persuasiveness of the blame avoidance strategy – and not the deployment of scientific knowledge per se. To enhance the causal validity of our results, the respondents were randomly assigned to the different articles (Morton & Williams, 2010).

The pivotal narrative in the articles entailed that the Danish Prime Minister Helle Thorning-Schmidt enacted substantial cuts in unemployment benefits. Following previous perceptual blame avoidance studies, we manipulated the headline, one paragraph and one quote in the texts while keeping the rest of the articles identical (Goerres, et. al, 2015; Slothuus, 2007; Wenzelburger & Hörisch, 2016; Wenzelburger, 2014). The drawback of manipulating three elements of the article is that it is difficult to pinpoint which aspect of the manipulation actually caused variation in the dependent variable. However, manipulating only one element of the article would have impinged heavily upon the ecological validity of our study – a frame encompasses a coherent narrative about a reform, and this coherence has to emerge from the articles as well.

Many framing studies have either used fictional or non-fictional news reports as experimental stimuli (Nelson, 2004; Nelson et al., 1997; Wenzelburger, 2014). In this project, we have taken the best of both strategies by using existing news articles as input for the manipulations. Following this approach, we decreased the artificiality of our study but, simultaneously, maintained in control over the exact nature of our manipulations. We conducted a pre-test among a small group of students (N = 25) in which we evaluated the degree of realism and neutrality of three different article layouts. Furthermore, the content of the vignettes was appraised and criticized by a Dutch journalist on the same parameters. Consequently, the vignettes mimicked the lay-out, content and style of actual online news articles as close as possible (see Appendix I).

To measure the framing effect of the perceptual blame avoidance strategy, respondents received a pre- and post-test questionnaire. The questionnaire started with

some general background characteristic such as age, gender and educational level. Subsequently, the subjects read one of the manipulated news-articles about the Danish policy reform and answered several questions about the measure taken. A psychometric personality scale was presented after this section to mitigate the chance that our treatment affected answers on the questions following the treatment. With this procedure, we tried to neutralize potential priming effects evoked by the news article and to lessen a post-treatment bias regarding the control variables (Montgomery, Nyhan, & Torres, 2016).[1] Finally, three control variables were measured, followed by a manipulation chᴇck and short debriefing about the experiment.[2]

Figure 1. Experimental conditions
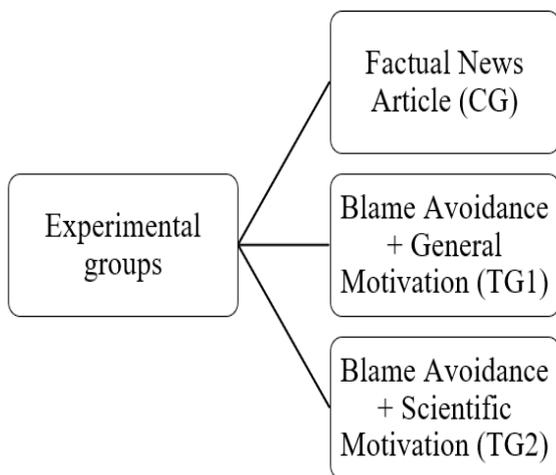
2.3   Measurements

The independent variable of this study was the perceptual blame avoidance strategy employed by the Danish prime-minister. The news article that the respondents had to read was an exponent of the 'damned if you do, damned if you don't' frame (Vis & Van Kersbergen, 2007). In this widely used story line, politicians emphasize that the status quo is untenable and stress that policy change is necessary regardless the potential negative consequences (Wenzelburger, 2011). This blame avoidance strategy essentially depoliticizes the reform, by claiming that reform is the only option – independent of party preferences or the political interests

of the government. Employing this strategy in our experiment was logical because the Danish government actually used this frame to justify the retrenchment of unemployment benefits in 2013.

The use of scientific evidence was included as a moderating variable in this study. Like the 'damned if you do, damned if you don't' narrative, deploying scientific evidence is a widely used strategy to depoliticize controversial decision-making (Pielke Jr., 2003: Stone, 2012). To test if references to scientific evidence strengthens the effect of the perceptual blame avoidance strategy, our second manipulation consisted of both elements. In this news article, the prime minister still emphasized that the current welfare system had become financially untenable, but was now supporting this assertion with evidence from economics and policy science. Framing research has found that citizens' attitude regarding public policy could be altered if support is articulated by a consensus of scientists (Bolsen, et. al. 2014). Hence, the quote of the prime-minister did not refer to one scientific source but to a combination of sources.

Citizens' attitudes regarding the Danish policy reform served as the dependent variable in this study. This measure was based on a three-item scale developed in a comparable study of Wenzelburger (2014).[3] After reading the news-article, respondents were asked whether they agreed with the following three statements: (1) 'The austerity measure of the Danish Government is justified', (2) 'I would support the enacted reform if I would have lived in Denmark', and (3) 'It is acceptable to cut unemployment benefits, if financing this support scheme seems untenable in the long run'. The subjects had to answer these statements on a seven-point Likert scale, ranging from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'. Eventually, these three items were grouped into one variable: Attitudes of Citizens (α = .881).

Two control variables were measured to reduce the likelihood that factors outside our model distorted the relationship between blame avoidance and attitudes: Risk Exposure and Prior Beliefs. Risk exposure refers to the likelihood that an individual will personally be affected by the reform. In a recent study, Wenzelburger and Hörisch (2016) hypothesized that citizens that bear high risk to become affected by a certain policy reform are more active in processing information about this topic. As a consequence, the framing of welfare state cutbacks was asserted to impact those affected

individuals more heavily. We measured risk exposure by asking subjects whether they received unemployment benefits themselves or whether they had a family member, partner, or close friend who did – now and in the past.

The second control variable, Prior Beliefs, addressed the opinions that citizens hold personally for whatever reason. Previous research indicates that individuals become less amenable to framing if they have strong values and beliefs that are contradictory to the message that is being articulated (Chong & Druckman, 2007). Attitudes about social justice, equality and solidarity are often found to be important to citizens' opinion on the welfare state and retrenchment policies in particular (Hasenfeld & Rafferty, 1989; Blekesaune & Quadagno, 2003; Slothuus, 2007). To control for this variable, we asked our subjects to indicate their party preference and respond on an existing five-item scale tapping into their agreement with egalitarian values (Slothuus, 2007). Based on the typology of Castles and Mair (1984), we designated these parties as either 'left' or 'right' in order to create a continuous variable that could be used in our model (i.e. a dummy variable).

web samples yield data comparable in quality to lab experiments (Germine et al., 2012). Since there is hardly any knowledge on the effects of scientific knowledge on the success of blame avoidance strategies, using a convenient sample first is justified. The current study merely serves as a pilot that can herald more research into this topic.

We checked the experimental groups on homogeneity for potentially important background variables and the two control variables (see table 1). This is important, because an equal distribution of these variables decreases the possibility of possible confounding variables (Morton & Williams, 2010). The differences between the control and treatment groups were insignificant for all variables, indicating that these variables did not distort the main effect we wanted to test. The table further demonstrates that 50.5 percent of the respondents was female, and the average age was 31.88. Nearly all subjects (97.1 percent) were highly educated, meaning that the respondent was either enrolled in secondary science education, university of applied sciences, or university.

Table 1: Sample composition on background variables

	% Female	Age	%Higher educated	Prior Beliefs (1-5)	%Right-wing	Risk Exposure[a]
Control group	53.2	31.55	95.7	3.27	19.2	.16
Group 1	48.9	31.79	95.7	3.41	15.9	.19
Group 2	48.8	32.33	100	3.51	12.2	.13
Mean	50.4	31.88	97.1	3.40	15.9	.16
Difference tests	Chi-square = .229 (p = .892)	Chi-square = 65.196 (p = .640)	Chi-square = 1.885 (p = .390)	Chi-square = 40.681 (p = .272)	Chi-square = .791 (p = .673)	Chi-square = 8.523 (p = .202)

[a] A score of 0 means there is no risk at all, and a score of one denotes the highest risk.

2.4   Participants

Our study employed a convenience sample, consisting of 147 Dutch citizens. Ten respondents were excluded from the analyses because they either took too little time or too much time to read the articles.[4] The experiment was distributed by e-mail and social media, so we relied on the self-selection of the respondents. This does not pose substantial challenges to the quality of the data: previous research demonstrates that self-selected

Besides, the respondents were quite positive towards the welfare state in their prior beliefs (an average of 3.4 on a five-point scale) and political preferences (predominantly left-wing). Subjects were also not substantially exposed to the risk of the treatment (M = .16)

Since the background variables are equally distributed among the groups, we did not include them in our

ANOVA-model. Although differences in the other control variables were also equally distributed among groups, they were included in our analyses because we theoretically expected them to alter the relationship between blame avoidance and citizen attitudes. We are aware of the fact that our dependent variable, Attitudes of Citizens, is categorical in nature, whereas the dependent variable of an ANOVA should be continuous. However, previous research demonstrates that categorical variables may be treated as continuous when there are six or more categories (Rhemtulla, Brosseau-Liard, & Savalei, 2012).

Furthermore, it should be noted that our sample is not representative of tour target population: the Dutch electorate. As could be expected based on the descriptive statistics of table 1, our sample was particularly dissimilar to the population in terms of age, education level and political preference. Comparison with the population, our respondents were younger, more often highly educated and more likely to vote for left-wing political parties (see table 2). [567] We are aware if this bias in our sample and have taken this into consideration when interpreting the results.

Table 2. Comparison sample to population.

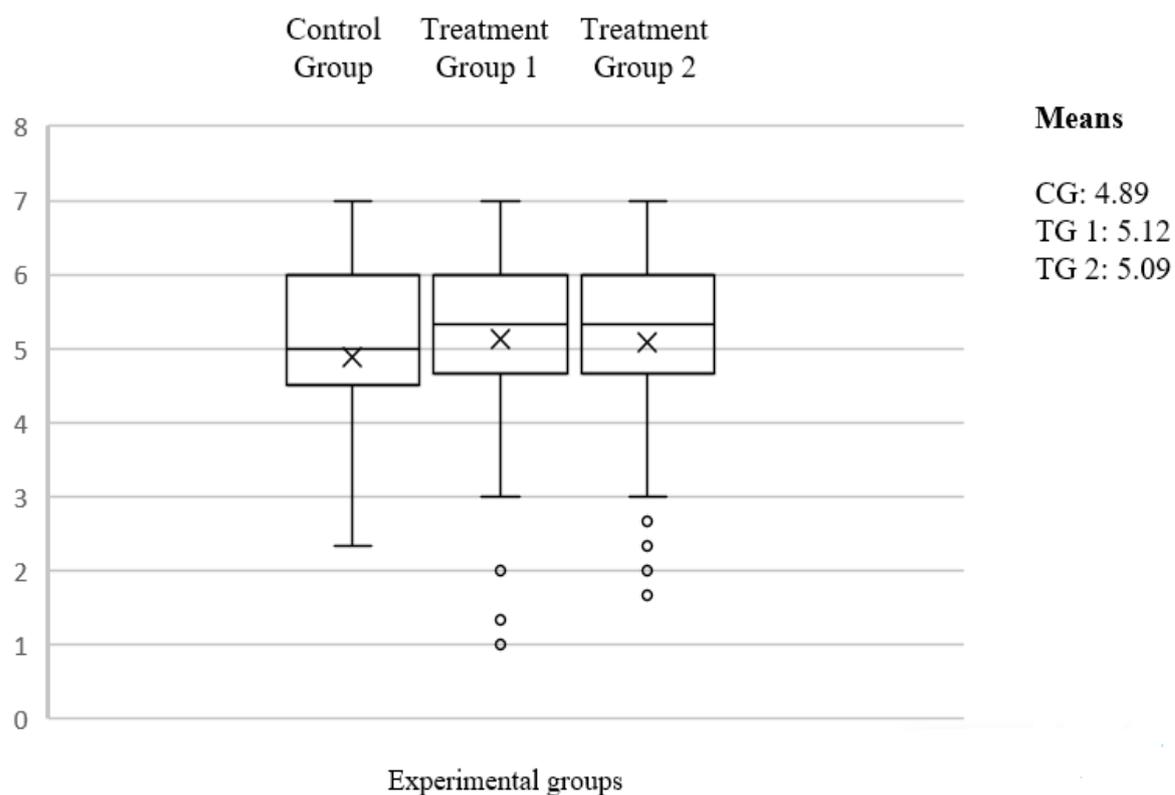|	Population (in %)	Sample (in %)
Gender		
Male	49.2	49.6
Female	50.8	50.4
Age[5]		
18-40	31.6	81
40-65	44.9	16.1
65-80	17.8	2.9
80+	5.7	0
Education[6]		
Lower educated	32.1	2.9
Intermediate educated	38.6	2.9
Higher educated	27.9	94.2
Political preference[7]		
Right-wing	50.7	15.3
Left-wing	47.9	81

Source: Stateline.cbs.nl; Kiesraad (2017).

4. Results

4.1 Blame avoidance effects

Our first hypothesis suggested that perceptual blame avoidance strategies would positively influence citizens' attitudes. In other words, respondents who read the news articles with the blame avoidance frames (i.e. treatment groups 1 and 2) would be more positive about the welfare retrenchment than the ones who received the factual description of the reform (i.e. the control group). Figure 2 depicts the differences between the control and treatment groups on the dependent variable (Attitudes of Citizens). The figure demonstrates that there were only minor differences between the groups, but these differences were not statistically significant ($F = .369$, $p = .692$). Hence, there is no evidence to support the first hypothesis: the attitudes regarding the policy reform were almost identical and insignificant in the three experimental groups.

The figure two not only illustrates that the differences between the groups were marginal, but also that the respondents were rather positive about the Danish welfare retrenchment. Contrary to the New Politics Thesis – which states that voters resent reforms – the respondents in our sample did on average 'slightly agree' with the proposed welfare cuts ($M = 5.03$ on a seven-point Likert scale). This is clearly not the result of the blame avoidance strategy: even the subjects in the control group who only received a factual description of the reform were positive about the proposed cutbacks ($M = 4.89$). This surprising finding is related to a recent stream of literature in which welfare state retrenchment does not appear to be electorally risky (Bonoli, 2012; Davidsson & Marx, 2013; Elmelund-Præstekær & Emmenegger, 2013).

A second step in the analysis was to carry out an ANOVA with control variables (see table 3). Including control variables rules out the possibility that underlying factors, such as risk exposure and prior beliefs, influence the attitudes of citizens. Again, the effect of blame avoidance on attitudes was not significant ($F = .553$, $p = .577$), indicating that the attitudes did not differ between the groups. In other words, incorporating a blame avoidance strategy had no positive effect on the attitudes towards the reform.

Control Group, Treatment Group 1, Treatment Group 2

Means

CG: 4.89
TG 1: 5.12
TG 2: 5.09

Experimental groups

Table 3: Effects on Attitude of Citizens

	Attitude of Citizens		
Variables	*F*	*Eta²*	*p*
Factors			
Blame Avoidance	.553	.010	.577
Covariates			
Prior Beliefs	1.315	.012	.254
Vote	.464	.004	.497
Risk Exposure	.040	.000	.843
Intercept	338.425	.760	.000
Df1, Df2	5, 113		
F	.826	.037	.534
R²	.037		
Adjusted R²	.008		

N = 113

In fact, the adjusted R-squared of .008 implies that our overall model is a very weak predictor for variations in attitudes of citizens. The same finding can be obtained from the eta-squared (i.e. the explained variance of a single variable): none of the variables explained a substantial part of the variance. Our results suggest that blame avoidance does not have a significant positive effect on the attitudes of the respondents.

A possible explanation for lack of variation on the dependent variable is that the manipulation did not have the intended effect on the respondents. Or to put it differently: although the news articles comprised a certain frame, the subjects may not have perceived the frame. We administered three questions in the post-test questionnaire to check whether they could still come up with the relevant aspects of the article. These tests elucidate that the lack of variation is not the result of a failed manipulation. Firstly, 97.1 percent of the respondents still remembered that Denmark was the country in which the reform was proposed. Besides, 96.2 percent of the subjects in treatment group 1 filled out at least one valid reason for the reforms (out of three). And 84.1 percent of the subjects in treatment group 2 correctly remembered that scientific knowledge was used to justify the reforms. These findings indicate that the insignificant results cannot be attributed to a flawed manipulation.

4.2   Moderating effect of scientific evidence

The second hypothesis read that blame avoidance strategies are more successful when the frame is supported by scientific knowledge. Since our experimental design encompassed three groups, a post-hoc test was required to outline the specific difference between the general blame avoidance group and the group with scientific knowledge. This study employed a Tukey's HSD to detect whether the differences between the groups were significant. As table 4 illustrates, none of the group means were significantly different. In fact, the group that read an article with scientific knowledge (TG2) reported an even less positive attitude towards the reform, albeit marginally (.030). We can thus conclude

5.   Conclusion and discussion

The findings of this study suggest that the deployment of perceptual blame avoidance strategies does not positively influence the attitudes of the highly educated, left-wing respondents of our study – not even if supplemented by rather objective scientific evidence. However, the most striking finding of this study is not so much that blame avoidance strategies did not influence attitudes, but rather that people do not necessarily oppose welfare reforms: in all experimental groups, the respondents were quite positive about the Danish proposal to shorten the duration of unemployment benefits. Given the general positive attitude towards the reforms, it is by no means surprising that blame avoidance strategies did not work. Most respondents simply approved of the reforms, whereas avoiding the blame is only required when people hold negative attitudes towards retrenchment. In other words, the positive attitudes towards the reforms rendered an assessment of blame avoidance superfluous. Moreover, there was barely any variation on the dependent variable, which makes it impossible to find significant effects.

The question beckons why the Danish government was not electorally punished, as was hypothesized by Paul Pierson (1994). Some explanations have a theoretical background while others may be the result of the design of our study. One theoretical explanation is that shaping opinions towards the welfare state is more complex and context dependent than the New Politics Thesis suggests (Giger & Nelson, 2013; Davidsson & Marx; Petersen, Slothuus, Stubager, & Togeby, 2011). Giger and Nelson (2013) found that ardent supporters of the welfare state may tolerate a retrenchment agenda because they are concerned about its economic costs as well. Although many people favor an egalitarian society, they are realistic about the costs to achieve this ideal at the same time. Hence, voters understand that reforms are necessary. A similar finding was obtained by Davidsson and Marx (2013), who found that positive welfare state attitudes are often matched with a conflicting preference to improve labor market performance.

Table 4: Mean differences experimental groups (with *p*-values)

Variables	Control Group	Treatment Group 1	Treatment Group 2
Control Group	1		
Treatment Group 1	.234 (.710)	1	
Treatment Group 2	.207 (.775)	-.030 (.995)	1

Post-hoc comparison using Tukey's HSD, mean differences shown

A second theoretical explanation that is that is particularly important for our study is the type of reform. Numerous studies found that reforming the labor market results in less opposition than life-course related programs – reforms that affect every citizen and not just the employed. Opinion research indicates that people generally believe that everyone who physically and mentally able to work should do so (Jensen, 2012; Tromborg, 2014; Zohlnhöfer, Wolf, & Wenzelburger, 2013). This may be one explanation for the positive attitude towards the reform of our study, which essentially focused on the less contested labor market.

A more methodological reason for not finding any effect is that the vignettes were about a different welfare state: a Danish reform was assessed by Dutch respondents. It seems plausible that the Dutch respondents are not solidary with a Danish reform, because it does not affect them directly. Moreover, the Netherlands has an unemployment benefit system that is similar to the Danish system after the reform. In the Netherlands, the duration of the unemployment is shorter than four years already, so the Danish reform may not seem too radical. It could be possible that citizens take the differences and similarities between their own and other welfare states into account, when constructing their attitudes about reforms proposals. To detect whether these underlying motivations actually had played a role, future studies should supplement experiments with qualitative interviews to descry these processes of opinion construction. For example, it would be interesting to ask left-wing respondents who favor an extensive welfare state why they consider reforms in neighboring countries to be acceptable.

Another methodological limitation that may have influenced the results is the homogeneity of our sample: our study mainly relied on young, left-wing and highly educated respondents that do not form a sound reflection of the Dutch voters. In other words, we can merely conclude that perceptual blame avoidance does not have a positive effect on the attitudes of highly educated adolescents with a left-wing political orientation. This may not be a surprise: young voters have not yet entered the labor market, so the consequences of reform may seem somewhat 'distant'. Besides, highly-educated citizens are less likely to get unemployed in the long-run and are therefore less exposed to the risk of the treatment (see §3.4). We do acknowledge that other samples could have produced different results. Lower-educated or more senior (e.g. 50-65 years) citizens,

for example, more often face difficulties finding a job after unemployment, which makes them vulnerable less prone to approve of the reform.

Finally, the respondents may have acted differently because they engaged in an experiment – a phenomenon that is called the 'experimental effect' (Morton & Williams, 2010). Reading a news article on a reform does not come close to the actual shaping of opinions on reforms. In real-life, people read news articles about welfare state reforms against a background of political commotion, media attention, and social turmoil. People will probably react differently when reforms are actually enacted and bring about social upheaval. In sum, we can merely conclude that blame avoidance using scientific knowledge do not affect young and highly educated voters with a leftist political orientation. We therefore propose that the study is replicated with other samples that closely resemble the population of voters.

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Footnotes

1.   A Dutch translation of the short Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS) was used to neutralize the post-treatment bias (Mackinnon et al, 1999). Respondents were asked to read a 10 different of psychological moods and asked to rate the extent to which "they feel this way in general". We used the 5-point Likert scale developed by Watson & Clarke (1999) to measure respondents' personalities.

2. To check whether the manipulation was perceived as intended, we used two strategies. First we measured the time the respondents took to read the news article ('Attention check'). Second, we asked three content related questions about the news article at the end of our post-test survey.

3. One item of the construct was deleted because it focused on the credibility of the source and not on the credibility of the frame itself.

4. This poses a problem because people may not have read the article well if they read it too quickly, and people might have been distracted by something else if they took too much time. Respondents who spent less than 22 seconds or more than 240 seconds were excluded. We decided on this cut-off point because these observations clearly deviated from the general pattern

5. First age group in population based encompasses the age of 20 till 40.

6. Level of higher education in population of Dutch citizens older than 15 (instead of 18).

7. Left-wing/right wing ratio based on national parliamentary election outcomes of 2017 (only the biggest 13 parties were included).

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