The Power of Conformity in Citizens' Blame:

Evidence from a Survey Experiment

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The authors examine whether conformity towards prevailing public opinions and pre-existing blame influences citizens' attribution of blame for public service failure, by using a between-group experimental design with five groups. Two groups received information cues mentioning different public opinions. Two additional groups received information on pre-existing blame or the absence of such blame. One control group did not receive any information. The empirical analysis reveals that public opinion in favor of blame leads to increased blame attribution, while a contrary public opinion decreases citizens' blame. Likewise, the expected increase in citizens' blame resulting from pre-existing blame is supported. However, the absence of blame has no effect. Overall, the experiment supports the impact of conformity on citizens' blame. In addition, the literature on citizens' blame is extended by utilizing a citizen-centered perspective and taking social psychological theory into account.

Keywords: citizens' blame, public service failure, conformity, behavioral public administration, experiment

Introduction

Citizens frequently depend on services provided by public administrations. However, public organizations often fail to adequately provide various essential services, which amounts to so-called public service failure (Van de Walle, 2004, 2016), leaving citizens in vulnerable positions (Ma & Christensen, 2019). Such service failures result in citizens experiencing undesirable situations, such as long waiting periods, wrong information being provided, or technical problems with e-government systems (Van de Walle, 2016). Despite the quasi-monopolistic positioning of many public services, citizens react to certain service failures. Usually, the reaction to these experiences is voice behavior in the form of the proclamation of dissatisfaction in order to transform the given service (James & Moseley, 2014). In this regard, public administration research refers to blame attribution[1], acknowledging the citizens' tendency to attribute responsibility to politicians and governmental entities in the case of service failures (Van de Walle, 2016).

Examining citizens' blame attribution is essential to the study of public administration for two reasons. First, blame is one of the central elements that mark citizens' interactions with politicians and public managers (Hood, 2011, p. 84; James, Jilke, Petersen, & Van de Walle, 2016, pp. 9–10). Therefore, citizens' blame is important to analyze how service delivery failure influences the legitimacy of public organizations (Dunleavy & Hood, 1994; Hood, 1991). Second, as negative events are more likely to be reported in the media and also more likely to be remembered, public managers as well as politicians tend to avoid blame (James et al., 2016, p. 374; Weaver, 1986, p. 84). Blame attribution and its anticipation, therefore, have a strong impact on public managers and politicians' behavior. Hence, it is important to understand the process in which citizens attribute blame in all its facets.

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[1] Throughout the article, we use the terms blame attribution and (citizens') blame synonymously.

Previous research on the evaluation of public services and the attribution of blame focuses on structural differences (James et al., 2016; Marvel & Girth, 2016), the usage and interpretation of different information (Baekgaard, 2015; James & Moseley, 2014; Nielsen & Baekgaard, 2015), and the influence of partisanship and other characteristics of citizens (Arceneaux & Stein, 2006; Forgette, King, & Dettrey, 2008; Lyons & Jaeger, 2014). This research shows that the aforementioned factors influence the intensity and amount of the blame attributed. However, while blame attribution entails decisive uncertainty (Gomez & Wilson, 2008), previous studies did not analyze the impact of social influence on the emergence of citizens' blame.

Since blame is a social and political activity (Hood, 2011, p. 7), the impact of social influence could partly explain blame attribution. Social psychology suggests that the theory of conformity (Bernheim, 1994) might be helpful to understand the variations in the amount and intensity of blame citizens attribute. Situations where citizens have to decide to whom they attribute blame usually involve various uncertainties. The costs, benefits, and the actors involved are, at least to some degree, unknown to the blame-maker. Therefore, it can be assumed that individuals try to reduce these uncertainties by conforming to social influences such as public opinions and the observable behaviors of others. Numerous empirical findings regarding the use of analytical simplifications in uncertain situations (Kahneman, 2011) underpin the assumption that citizens might draw on similar mechanisms when attributing blame for public service failure. Building on social influence as the missing link, this article aims to answer the following question: Does conformity to social pressure influence citizens' blame attribution? Providing an understanding of the social forces influencing blame would help create a more holistic model of the emergence of blame.

This article is structured as follows: The first section clarifies the proposed causal relationship between social pressure and blame. We review the previous literature and

introduce different factors that influence blame. By highlighting the importance of conformity, we develop two hypotheses on its effect. The subsequent section provides details of the experiment, whose aim is to examine the proposed impact by utilizing a real public service context. Thereafter, the data and methods are presented. We subsequently describe the results of the experiment, while the following section comprises a discussion of the results and the limitations. Finally, we highlight this article's contributions to the existing literature and describe the implications of the findings for future research and practitioners.

Citizens' Blame and Uncertainty

In general, blame attribution is denoted as the act of proclaiming or communicating that a prevailing circumstance is wrong and that specific individuals or organizations are responsible for this plight (Hood, 2011, p. 6–7; Shaver, 1985, p. 4). This general definition includes two necessary conditions. First, the blame-maker perceives an avoidable, relevant harm. Second, blame attribution also requires a perceived responsibility, for example, the organization responsible for fundamental mistakes during service delivery (Hood, Jennings, & Copeland, 2016, p. 543; Sulitzeanu-Kenan & Hood, 2005, p. 2). Citizens' blame attribution is based on these aspects but entails a shift in focus to the public sector. Indeed, citizens' blame influences the entire public sector, including different actors who fulfill many distinct roles and functions. Additionally, previous research suggests that the attribution of blame to actors in the public sector has a significant influence on the functioning processes of public facilities (Hood, 2011, p. 8). By attributing blame, citizens can hold the public actors accountable far more impactfully than the simple act of voting.

Diverse research has been conducted explicitly focusing on this phenomenon. Scholars have predominately examined the influence of different types of structural information on citizens' blame attribution. James et al. (2016) have used experimental methods to provide empirical evidence of the impact of contracting out and operational responsibility on

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blame attribution for public service failure. According to their findings, a reduction in blame for public service failure is observable if a public service is delegated to a public manager. Similarly, Piatak, Mohr, and Leland (2017) find that service providers' sector affiliation influences blame attribution; it is directed at private sector providers if a failed service is contracted out. Nevertheless, blame attribution shifts towards the public sector if budget problems are responsible for the failure of service provision. Marvel and Girth (2016), however, do not find clear evidence regarding the influence of different public service arrangements on the attribution of blame.

Besides the most recent studies, scholars have also examined additional factors that influence citizens' blame attribution; using an experimental design, Lyons and Jaeger (2014, p. 335) show that partisanship has a strong influence. If the information corresponds with individuals' partisan preference, they blame competing parties. Likewise, individuals ignore information that is contrary to their preference. The same holds for the consistency of information with prior beliefs. If there is no consistency, accurate blame attribution is less likely (Baekgaard & Serritzlew, 2016, p. 81). Additional research supports the finding that motivated reasoning decisively influences individuals' attribution of blame, indicating that incumbents possibly face blame from citizens supporting an opposing political party (Bisgaard, 2015, p. 858; Donovan, Kellstedt, Key, & Lebo, 2019). Similarly, further research shows that citizens' blame attribution depends on individuals' distance to their respective political agents. For instance, if a responsible politician chooses policies which deviate from citizens' policy expectations, the potential blame attribution for subsequent policy failure would increase (Sulitzeanu-Kenan & Zohlnhöfer, 2019, p. 55). Additionally, ethnic affiliation and environmental vulnerability are relevant to the likelihood and intensity of blame attribution (Forgette et al., 2008, p. 686). FInally, research on implicit public service failure (for example wrong reaction to catastrophes) shows that the degree of concern due to negative

experiences shapes citizens' attribution of blame. Arceneaux and Stein (2006, p. 51) conducted a survey highlighting that individuals who face the worst experiences are more likely to attribute blame. The same study provides insights into the effects of knowledge on political systems; high knowledge of local politics is linked to the correct attribution of responsibility.

The given results underline the importance of situation, socialization, social peers, and heuristic information processing with respect to citizens' blame. Consequently, these findings emphasize the relevance of uncertainty for policy assessment and blame attribution when a public service failure occurs. Citizens face considerable ambiguity regarding the public sector's structure when it comes to public service failures. Thus, "because many different officials contribute in many different ways to decisions and policies of government, it is difficult [for citizens] even in principle to identify who is […] responsible for political outcomes" (Thompson, 1980, p. 905). Formal responsibilities are often unclear leaving considerable uncertainty. The literature examining blame attribution illustrates this circumstance by referring to the catastrophe of "Hurricane Katrina"—while governmental endeavors were generally described as insufficient, considerable discord arose regarding the attribution of responsibility (Gomez & Wilson, 2008). The disaster relief measures during Katrina exemplify the "problem of many hands" (Thompson, 1980, p. 905), as responsibility was distributed throughout the federalist structure. Thus, while local agencies have considerable formal authority, state and federal entities become important in case of a disaster. Although a catastrophe like Hurricane Katrina is an extreme example, citizens still face "a complex amalgam of diffuse responsibilities and sometimes conflicting institutional rules and bureaucratic norms" (Gomez & Wilson, 2008, p. 636), even in the case of the provision of comparatively simple services. For most citizens, adequately assessing which actor is in charge is only possible if they exhibit political sophistication and possess legal knowledge (Gomez & Wilson, 2008). Given the complexity of jurisdiction and competencies, citizens face a highly demanding task

when attributing blame. Consequently, the attribution of blame is associated with a high degree of uncertainty and issues a challenge to citizens, as information about responsibilities is often very limited (Arceneaux, 2006; Gomez & Wilson, 2003; Moynihan, 2012).

Uncertainty influences the selection and weighting of the information used for evaluation. In this regard, citizens draw on different reference points to reduce the lack of information and the concomitant uncertainty. Important reference points that cues obtain from the social environment and through media help to reduce uncertainty (Andrews, 2008; Maestas, Atkeson, Croom, & Bryant, 2008). Thus, it is likely that citizens rely on such cues when it comes to blame attribution (Rölle, 2017). Previous research supports this assumption by showing that those individuals who pay more attention to the media are more likely to address blame to the government, as shown by the case of Hurricane Katrina (Maestas et al., 2008). Furthermore, the political environment also influences the likelihood of blame attribution. Usually, citizens seem to rely on informational cues to reduce uncertainty, leading to a considerable shift in the intentions and behaviors related to blame attribution.

Influence of Conformity on Citizens' Blame

Citizens' recourse to informational cues includes heuristic assessments of situations and circumstances. Especially, limited information fosters simplifications of given situations, through which one can overcome the lack of information and, thus, the subsequent uncertainty. A major consequence of such a heuristic process is the lack of critical assessment of the received information. This, in turn, leads to a tendency of conformity, including the assumption that incomplete information serves as an adequate representation of reality.

Social psychology research suggests that decision-making and the emergence of implicit attitudes build on other individuals' and groups' proposed opinions and actions (Bernheim, 1994, p. 864; Mackie, 1987, p. 41). Thus, social influence is predestined to play a crucial role in the differences in blame attribution regarding public service failures. Theories

of conformity and related empirical research enable scholars to understand how social influence affects citizens' blame. Research suggests that the decision of whether to behave in a particular way depends on different possible conditions. In general, scholars point out two types of social influences that lead to conforming behaviors (Amini, Ekström, Ellingsen, Johannesson, & Strömsten, 2017; Cialdini & Trost, 1998). Normative social influence primarily refers to group settings and denotes those influences aimed at the fulfillment of other people's positive expectations (Deutsch & Gerard, 1955, p. 629). Thus, it leads to conformity inasmuch as impulsive behavior is inclined towards affiliation and belonging (Vlaev, King, Dolan, & Darzi, 2016, p. 554). On the other hand, informational social influence denotes an "influence to accept information obtained from others as evidence about reality" (Deutsch & Gerard, 1955, p. 629). In this regard, conformational citizens' blame in the context of public service failure features different possible requirements. Besides the general information about any public service failure, other peoples' thoughts and beliefs exhibit the possibility to alter behavior. In this regard, scholars propose the relevance of others opinions in the sense of normative social influence (Hartman & Weber, 2009, 552; Kelman, 1961, 60; Vlaev et al., 2016, p. 554). Additionally, previous research points out the importance of preceding observable behavior because it serves as an easily accessible anchor on which one can make decisions (Banerjee, 1992, pp. 797–99). Contrary to others' opinions, pre-existing behavior is linked to informative social influence because it only features information on common behavior, regardless of its acceptance (Vlaev et al., 2016, p. 554).

We first examine the informational social influence through public opinion on the attribution of blame. In general, public opinion refers to "the dominating opinion which compels compliance of attitude and behavior" (Noelle-Neumann, 1974, p. 44). Empirical findings about public opinion and peer pressure suggest that citizens alter their blame if they

receive different opinions about the suitability of blame attribution. Cialdini (1993, p. 89) refers to this aspect as "social proof." Individuals try to exhibit correct behavior (Axelrod, 1986, p. 1105) because "we view a behavior as more correct in a given situation to such a degree that we see others performing it" (Cialdini, 1993, p. 117). This informational social influence is very likely to shift the attributed blame because the phenomenon of blame attribution comprises decisive uncertainties. Individuals tend to rely on others' opinions when it comes to uncertainty. Thus, one assumes that changes in blame attribution are reasonable (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004; Cialdini & Trost, 1998). If a stated public opinion reveals a promoting statement regarding the attribution of blame, an increase in citizens' blame can be expected. An opposite statement that excoriates the blame attribution should, thus, lead to a reduction in citizens' blame:

> **H1a**: *A stated public opinion which emphasizes that blame is appropriate increases citizens' blame.*
>
> **H1b**: *A public opinion which emphasizes that blame is inappropriate decreases citizens' blame.*

This article also examines normative social influence. In this regard, it aims to assess whether pre-existing blame influences the attribution of blame. Pre-existing blame refers to any blame that an individual has already attributed to the perceived responsible entity. In this case, social proof also explains a potential shift in citizens' behavior, because the behaviors of other individuals provide normative reference points for given situations (Axelrod, 1986, p. 1105; Cialdini, 1993, p. 117). This particularly holds true in unknown or uncommon situations (Aarts, Dijksterhuis, & Custers, 2003, pp. 461–62). Since the general framework in which blaming occurs is uncertain and related to incomplete information, it seems logical that the specific individual behavior would align with observable and external behavior. Existing

findings on the effects of citizens' pre-existing images support this theoretical explanation (Marvel, 2016, p. 443). Implicit attitudes towards the public sector lead to the "behavioral contagion" effect, which refers to the imitation of preceding behavior (Wheeler, 1966, pp. 179-180). Building on these findings, we investigate whether the presence or absence of citizens' blame has a crucial influence on the participants' subsequent blame attribution:

> *H2a*: *Available information indicating pre-existing blame increases citizens' blame.*
>
> *H2b*: *Available information indicating an absence of pre-existing blame decreases citizens' blame.*

An Experiment on Blame for Long Waiting Periods

The hypotheses were tested using an online experiment with a between-group design. The participants were randomly assigned to one of five experimental groups. After a short introduction with relevant information on the experiment, the participants were given a fictitious newspaper article detailing a realistic public service failure. Initially, the article described a situation in a municipal service center responsible for all kinds of local services like the issuing of IDs, the registration of citizens, and various applications. Additional information stated the average time a citizen had to wait before obtaining an appointment at one of the city's service centers. The service failure consisted of extreme waiting times of 34–57 days before a citizen would get an appointment at a service center (see Appendix B for the full vignette). These numbers resampled the actual waiting times for an appointment in the city's service centers. Participants did not receive additional information on who was responsible for the long waiting times. By doing so, we ensured that the participants would base their attribution of blame only on their perception of who was responsible or deserved blame.

Afterwards, all participants evaluated the service center's performance. These questions were asked to obtain an additional control variable for the statistical analysis, since participants' initial evaluation might have confounded their later blame attribution. Subsequently, the participants randomly received an information cue in the form of an addendum to the initial newspaper article. Treatment groups 1 and 2 saw an addendum mentioning either a public opinion in favor of blaming local politicians or rejecting the blame attribution. The vignette outlining a public opinion in favor of blaming local politicians indicates that citizens were upset because politicians did not seem to care and that citizens were in favor of criticism in any form that would force politicians to recognize the problem. Moreover, that statement suggests that politicians should be blamed for their failures. The vignette rejecting the blame towards local politicians states the inappropriateness of blame, because this would not change a given situation. The article suggests a lack of staff as the main reason for the waiting times. Moreover, the administration would need room to focus on solving such a problem. Groups 3 and 4 saw an addendum mentioning the presence/absence of pre-existing blame. Pre-existing blame was indicated in a report about citizens starting a petition and a campaign to move the responsible politicians to solve the problem, along with writing newspaper articles and blog posts. The vignette indicating an absence of pre-existing blame mentions that there was no response to the problem of waiting times by the citizens. The control group did not receive additional information. Figure 1 summarizes the experimental design and Appendix B displays the exact wording of the vignettes.

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┌─────────────────────────────┐
│  Respondents to study        │
│  invitation                  │
│  (n = 328)                   │
└─────────────────────────────┘
              │
              ▼
┌─────────────────────────────┐
│  Introduction and newspaper  │
│  article about waiting time  │
└─────────────────────────────┘
              │
              ▼
┌─────────────────────────────┐
│  Measure of service quality  │
└─────────────────────────────┘
              │
              ▼
┌─────────────────────────────┐
│  Random assignment           │
└─────────────────────────────┘
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1. Public opinion in favor of blaming (n = 61)	2. Public opinion not in favor of blaming (n = 66)	3. High intensity of pre-existing blame (n = 65)	4. No pre-existing blame (n = 69)	5. No additional information (control) (n = 67)

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┌─────────────────────────────┐
│  Attention check             │
└─────────────────────────────┘
              │
              ▼
┌─────────────────────────────┐
│  Measurement of dependent    │
│  variable                    │
└─────────────────────────────┘
              │
              ▼
┌─────────────────────────────┐
│  Measurement of control      │
│  variables                   │
└─────────────────────────────┘
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Figure 1: Experimental Design. Source: Authors. Available at https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.8306162 under a CC-BY 4.0 license.

The questionnaire participants subsequently filled out contained an attention check to ensure that the final sample would only comprise those who had processed the survey with adequate attention and accuracy. Following the attention check, the participants had to report

the amount of blame they assigned to local politicians for the presented service failure. The questionnaire concluded with a set of items on the gender, age, and political orientation of the participants. These variables were chosen to check for additional effects on blame attribution, as previous research suggests that these variables indeed affect citizens' blame attribution (James et al., 2016, p. 88).

We used a vignette study with newspaper reports of the service failure to create a situation that is as realistic as possible. If citizens do not directly witness a service failure of a public organization, they receive information regarding such a service failure from the media (Jerit, Barabas, & Bolsen, 2006). Hence, the experimental treatment resamples the basis of information that citizens possess in reality, when they decide about attributing blame. This is also realistic insofar as the newspaper article does not provide extensive information on responsibilities regarding service failure and, therefore, leaves citizens with a certain degree of uncertainty about who should be blamed. Hence, the experimental design creates a situation of blame attribution that is realistic regarding blame attribution (ecological validity) and simultaneously allows the manipulation of the social influence effect.

Data and Methods

Sample

The empirical analysis in this article used experimental data gathered in Germany in April 2017. The participants were students of the University of Hamburg and volunteered to be part of the subject pool comprising the faculty of business, economics, and social sciences' experimental laboratory. We used a student sample for this study to balance the internal and external validity of the experiment. To study blame attribution, it is essential for participants to relate to a described scenario. With a highly diverse sample, it is challenging to design an

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experiment that is realistic for all participants. We, therefore, used a student sample and presented a scenario that would constitute a part of their personal experiences. As students occasionally visit a municipal service center to register a change in their address or request a new passport or extend an existing passport or ID, they are familiar with the services provided by these organizations. This might not have been the case for a broad population sample. A random sample of all citizens might have provided higher external validity, while simultaneously threatening internal validity. Using a student sample is, therefore, in line with common recommendations for such research designs (Druckman & Kam, 2011).

As we did not have substantive knowledge about the true effect sizes of the proposed relationship between public opinion and pre-existing blame on citizens' blame attribution, we assumed a medium effect size of Cohan's $d = 0.5$. Based on an a priori power analysis for a two-tailed t-test with $\alpha = .05$ and a power of .80, we aimed for a sample of 64 participants per group, a total of 320 participants. Hence, we stopped data collection after approximately 320 participants completed the experiment. This approach resulted in a sample of 328 participants who answered all necessary questions (60–69 in each treatment group). The applied software tool "hroot" ensured multi-stage randomization (Bock, Baetge, & Nicklisch, 2014, p. 119). The tool randomly divided the subject pool, consisting of 5,125 students, into five groups, resulting in 1,025 participants being invited for each treatment. The tool sent separate email invitations for each treatment and a reminder two days later.

Participation was linked to the opportunity to win a small payment in the form of an Amazon voucher. Altogether, the sample was rewarded with approximately 10 euros for each laboratory hour. We excluded the answers of 66 participants because they did not comply

with the attention check[2]. Another respondent, who provided flippant answers to open questions, was excluded. The final sample, thus, consisted of 261 participants. The CONSORT chart (Schulz, Altman, & Moher, 2010) in Appendix C gives a detailed overview of the complete responses of participants.

Measures

Citizens' attribution of blame as a reaction to the information presented in the sample was measured with seven items. Four items were adopted from previous research on citizens' blame (James et al., 2016, p. 88; McGraw, 1991, p. 1140). However, in addition to the research that focused on citizens' perception of deserved blame, we added further aspects: perceived responsibility and willingness to attribute blame. We are convinced that citizens' blaming behavior includes not only the perception that politicians deserve to be blamed but also the notion that politicians are responsible for service failure and that citizens are, in general, willing to attribute blame for the same to politicians. Hence, the four items capturing deserved blame are complemented by two items on perceived responsibility and one on the willingness to attribute blame. We used slider scales ranging from 0–100 to provide precise results (Khalifa & Liu, 2002, p. 39). The full wording of these and all other variables are shown in Appendix A. Exploratory factor analysis confirms that the seven items on citizens' blame attribution capture a common underlying construct. The first factor has an eigenvalue of 4.20, while potential additional factors have eigenvalues of 0.19 and lower. The items load well on the single factor, with loadings between .62 and .92. We used the mean of all seven items to build a blame attribution score for each respondent.

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[2] The participants were required to report the correct information on the average waiting times in the service center presented in the newspaper article. The question offered three possible answers, "1–2 weeks," "3–5 weeks," and "6–8 weeks." Only those participants who stated "6–8 weeks" were included in the final sample. We re-ran all analyses, including those participants who had failed the attention check, but did not find substantial differences compared to the analyses excluding them.

The control variables included in the questionnaire are based on common sociodemographic standards and previous research. Age was measured by subtracting the year of birth from the current year. Gender was denoted as gender identity, with no participant using the option 'other.' We also assumed that the participants' political orientation would have potential influence, and thus asked for their political classification on an 11-point scale ranging from 0 = extreme left to 10 = extreme right (Kroh, 2007). We further included two supplementary control variables. First, we asked question to assess whether the participants had attended a municipal service center in the previous 12 months. Second, before the treatment, the participants had to evaluate the overall quality of the public service described in the newspaper article. In this regard, they also stated their assessment of the (1) time management, (2) their conviction regarding receiving significant service on time, and (3) the strength of service center's staff. After confirming the factor structure through exploratory factor analysis[3] (eigenvalue = 2.31 (next factor: 0.09); factor loadings between .68 and .80), we built a mean index.

Statistical Analysis

We analyzed the data using linear regression models with ordinary least squares (OLS), using the statistical software 'R' (R Core Team, 2018) version 3.5.0. The data and analysis code are available at https://osf.io/4ad5m/. The different experimental treatments were included by using dummy variables, which facilitated the estimation of change in citizens' blame due to the various information cues when compared to the control group. Covariates were included in an additional multiple linear regression model to analyze the additional effects on citizens' blame.

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[3] The number of factors were determined using parallel analysis (Horn, 1965). The factor analysis entailed the use of minimum residual method and oblique rotation.

Results

To assess the successful randomization of participants to the treatment groups, we tested for possible differences in the participants' age, gender, income, political orientation, and their perception of service quality. The results in Table 1 revealed no significant differences between the five groups. The randomization, therefore, resulted in such group characteristics that the different experimental groups resembled one another.

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics of the overall sample[4]. The degree of blame attributed by the participants ranges from very low values (4.43) to the maximum of the scale (100). The average attributed blame is 51.26. 25 percent of the participants responded with scores of 36.14 or less, half of them responded with scores of more than 52.43 and a quarter of respondents reported values above 64.57. Overall the responses are asymptotically normal distributed with a standard deviation of 20.27 (Shapiro-Wilk test for normal distribution: $W = 0.994$, $p = .421$). Women are slightly overrepresented due to the higher number of female students at the university. Furthermore, the subjects in the sample are relatively young. The vast majority of participants were found to have also attended a service center within the 12 months preceding the study. Finally, the participants categorized themselves slightly left of the political center.

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[4] A correlation table with all variables is included in Appendix D.

Table 1: Randomization Check

	Public opinion in favor of blaming	Public opinion not in favor of blaming	High intensity of pre-existing blame	No pre-existing blame	Control	Randomization Check
Age	25.98	26.98	26.36	26.07	26.23	$F(4,256) = 0.43$, $p = .79$
Gender	0.58	0.53	0.59	0.61	0.44	$Chi2(4) = 3.81$, $p = .43$
Visited municipal service center	0.58	0.63	0.52	0.57	0.60	$Chi2(4) = 1.49$, $p = .83$
Perception quality of service	29.76	32.87	30.33	32.37	28.40	$F(4,256) = 0.58$, $p = .68$
Political orientation	3.62	4.33	3.62	4.07	4.02	$F(4,256) = 1.91$, $p = .11$
n	50	51	56	56	48	

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics

	n	Mean	St. Dev.	Min	Max
Citizens' blame	261	51.26	20.27	4.43	100
Age	261	26.32	4.31	19	45
Gender (1 = female)	261	0.55	0.50	0	1
Visited municipal service center	261	0.58	0.49	0	1
Perception of quality of service	261	30.80	17.32	0	81.0
Political orientation (0 = extreme left)	261	3.93	1.62	0	9

To test the differences between the treatment groups, we first conducted a one-way *ANOVA* and, afterwards, detailed the differences using an *OLS* regression analysis. The *ANOVA* analysis shows that the five treatment groups differ significantly from each other with respect to the amount of blame they attribute ($F(4, 256) = 14.37$, $p < .001$). Table 3 provides the results of the statistical analyses with *OLS* regression. Model 1 contains dummy variables for the different experimental treatments, showing the predicted change that the treatments caused compared to the control group. Model 2 takes additional information into account, such as age, gender, and political orientation, as well as other control variables.

Table 3: Effects of treatments on blame attribution

	(1)	(2)
Public opinion in favor of blaming	10.775**	11.392**
	(3.731)	(3.572)
Public opinion not in favor of blaming	-14.139***	-14.584***
	(3.713)	(3.566)
High intensity of pre-existing blame	8.431*	8.769*
	(3.632)	(3.489)
No pre-existing blame	0.781	1.529
	(3.632)	(3.486)
Age (centered)		1.255***
		(0.261)
Gender (1 = female)		0.854
		(2.267)
Visited municipal service center		1.774
		(2.237)
Perception of quality of service		-0.166**
		(0.064)
Political orientation (0 = extreme left)		0.394
		(0.688)
Constant	49.982***	51.779***
	(2.665)	(4.638)
Observations	261	261
R^2	0.183	0.277
Adjusted R^2	0.171	0.251

Note: Ordinary least squares; *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001; Standard errors in parentheses.

The first model shows statistically significant effects of the first three treatments on citizens' blame, while the fourth treatment does not engender significant changes. These effects persist after adding the control variables in model 2. The treatments alone explain 18.3 % of the total variance of the blame attribution variable. The inclusion of the control variables increases the explained variance to 27.7 % (Adjusted R^2 = .25).

We tested the proposed hypotheses by analyzing the four treatments' regression estimates. These represent the change in the blame attribution variable in comparison to the control group. The results partially confirm the expectations stated in the hypotheses. Presenting a public opinion in favor of blaming leads to an increase in the blame attribution measure by 10.8 ($t(251)$ = 2.88, p = .004), which equals an effect size[5] of Hedge's g = 0.63 (95 % CI [0.22, 1.03]). The presentation of a contrary public opinion rejecting blame decreases blame attribution by 14.1 ($t(251)$ = -3.81, $p < .001$, Hedge's g = 0.91, 95% CI [0.50, 1.33]). Therefore, the leading public opinion influences citizens' blame, in line with the first hypothesis.

Subsequently, the information on pre-existing blame also influences the amount of blame, with the blame attribution increasing by 8.43 ($t(251)$ = 2.32, p = .021, Hedge's g = 0.42, 95% CI [0.03, 0.81]). Conversely, the absence of pre-existing blame increases the measured blame by 0.78 ($t(251)$ = 0.22, p = .83, Hedge's g = 0.04, 95% CI [-0.35, 0.43]). The non-significant effect of the absence of pre-existing blame does not support hypothesis 2, whereas the influence of pre-existing blame supports the hypothesis. Figure 2 provides an overview of the differences in the blame attribution variable between the experimental groups. The plot displays the mean response (black line), the 95 % confidence interval of the mean (white box), the variables' density (grey area; the wider the area at a certain value of the variable, the more observations of this value are found), and the raw data (one dot per observation).

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[5] As Cohen's d overestimates the true population effect, we have followed common advice to report Hedge's g—a corrected version of Cohen's d—as the effect size metric (Lakens, 2013).
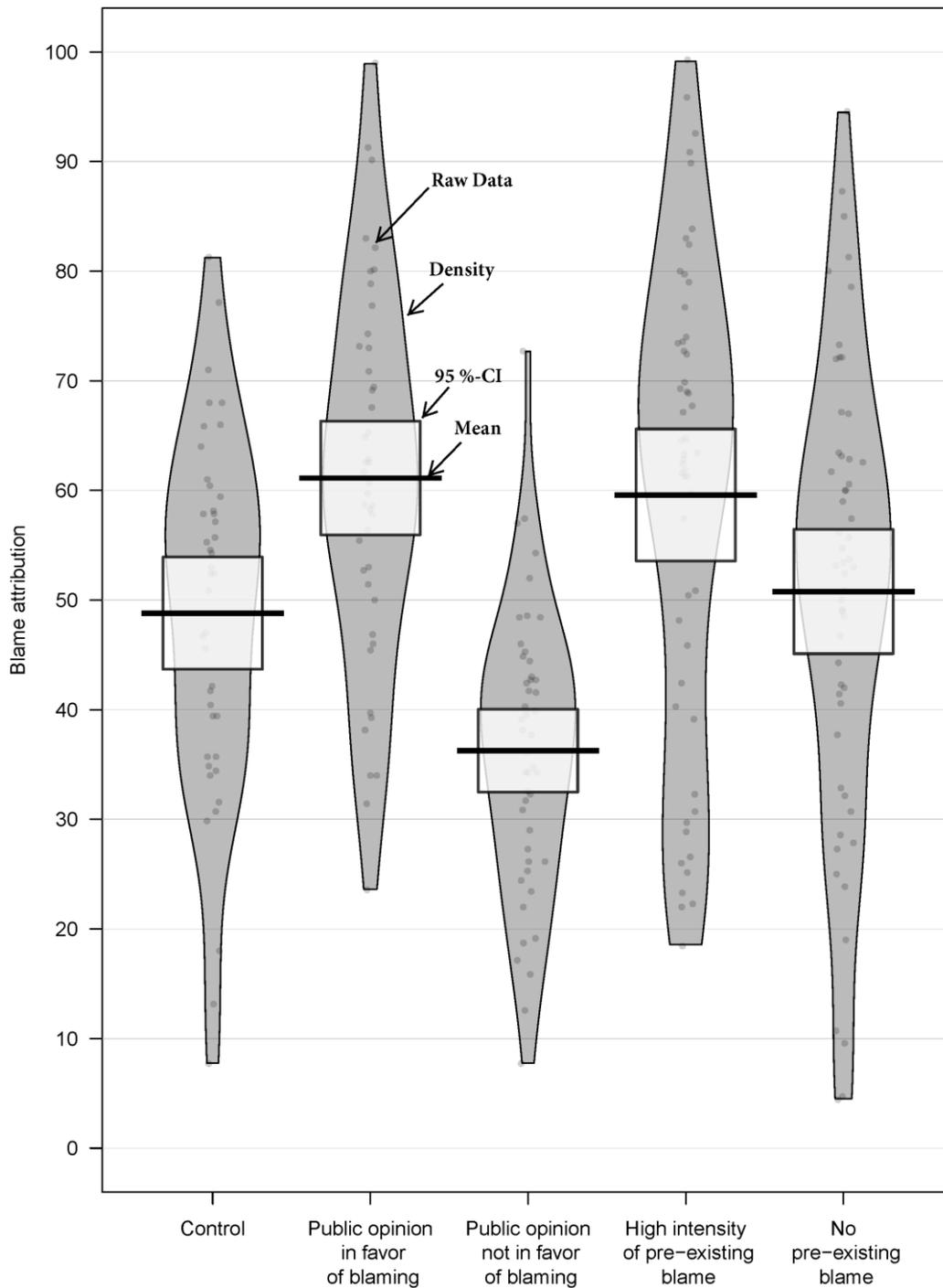
Figure 2: Differences in blame attribution by experimental groups. Source: Authors. Available at https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.8306201 under a CC-BY 4.0 license.

In addition to the examination of the main effects drawn from the research hypotheses, we analyzed the influence of the control variables in Model 2. The regression estimates of two additional variables are statistically significant. The model estimates a decrease in citizens' blame by 0.17 (p = .010), caused by the participants' pre-treatment assessment of the service quality. Furthermore, an increase in the participants' age leads to an increase in citizens' blame by 1.26 (p < .001). Given previous research on citizens' blame and blame attribution in general, this finding was expected (James et al. 2016, p. 88). However, one should be careful when interpreting this effect, as the sample does not provide the opportunity to draw generalized conclusions about such characteristics.

Discussion

The results of the experiment show that conformity plays a crucial role in citizenship behavior, particularly regarding the intensity of blame attribution in case of a public service failure. The results indicate that a public opinion influences the way in which citizens react to a given public service failure. The analysis shows that a stated public opinion reinforcing the blame attribution leads to increased citizens' blame. Building on this effect, we additionally discover that the opposite public opinion, which deprecates the blame attribution, decreases the following amount of citizens' blame. Consequently, the data support the expectations of the first research hypothesis.

These findings add a new perspective to the blaming literature, which, to date, focuses on structural aspects that influence citizens' blame attribution (James et al. 2016; Marvel and Girth 2016), along with the influence of partisanship and additional citizen characteristics (Arceneaux & Stein, 2006; Forgette et al., 2008; Lyons & Jaeger, 2014). We can now conclude that it is not only the service provision arrangement or citizen characteristics but also social influence that drives blame. Attributing blame for a public service failure is an ambiguous situation. Who is responsible? What could have been done to avoid failure? What is an

appropriate reaction? Citizens need to answer all these questions in order to decide on whom to blame. In such a situation, people tend to take others' opinions into account in their endeavor to seek conformity (Bernheim, 1994). If others think that blame is appropriate, they are more likely to engage in blaming, and are less likely to engage in blaming if others think it is inappropriate.

The findings regarding pre-existing blame are ambiguous, as only one effect can be confirmed. The behavior of other individuals could be a required information source through which to evaluate the uncertainty regarding blame attribution. If someone already blames politicians for service failure, people tend to follow this signal and join in attributing such a blame. Conversely, others' lack of blame could be less concrete with regard to a warranted orientation. The absence of blame, therefore, could constitute a lack of reliable information for the experiment participants. Therefore, the content of the information cue does not differ significantly from that of the control group. Cialdini, Kallgren, and Reno (1991, p. 204) confirm this assumption, arguing that conforming behavior only occurs if attention is shifted towards certain normative constructs. Nevertheless, as this does not occur, the absence of blame does not provide insights that enable the participants to reduce their uncertainty, which would allow them to conform to the presented information cue. In this regard, we can partly confirm hypothesis 2, since the data confirm the pre-existing blame's positive effect.

Following these findings, it is crucial to point out the limitations of our study. The limited representativeness of the sample might have caused external validity problems. We decided to use a sample with limited heterogeneity to base our experiment on vignettes that all participants could relate to. This, however, has limited the external validity of our results. Although the participants in this study show some variance with regard to socio-demographic indicators, it is not representative of the whole population. It seems possible that older or less educated citizens respond differently to a public opinion about blame or pre-existing blame.

Older citizens, for example, could have more experience in interacting with public administration and possess more knowledge about political-administrative systems, leading to higher confidence and less suggestibility (Pasupathi, 1999). Alternatively, our analysis might underestimate conformity for older individuals, since they might differently interact with media information and have a higher tendency for motivated reasoning. While the significant effect of age on one's willingness to attribute blame suggests less susceptibility to conformity with prevailing public opinions and pre-existing blame, we cannot generalize this result due to the limited age range of the participants. Similar mechanisms might be observed for citizens who are more educated. Higher levels of education might result in more knowledge about political-administrative procedures and, in turn, reduce the effects of public opinion or preexisting blame on blame attribution. In this vein, we might have underestimated our main effects as the participants in our sample were more educated than the average citizen.

Moreover, the experimental design is based on a hypothetical scenario, which might have limited ecological validity. We deliberately used a newspaper article to gather information on participants' blame attribution as it represents how citizens primarily receive their information about public service failure. Similar to a real-life setting, participants were confronted with a realistic amount of uncertainty and built their opinion on the information available. To further increase the ecological validity of the experiments, the vignettes referred to a real-life service-failure the participants would be familiar with. Additionally, the design of the vignettes resembled a newspaper article by the major local newspaper, with which the participants would also be familiar. As we did not find an ethical way of using a field experiment to test how social influence affects citizens' blame attribution, the presented study seems to be as realistic as possible. In this regard, previous research suggests that vignette experiments provide adequate proxies for individual behavior (Hainmueller, Hangartner, & Yamamoto, 2015). Nevertheless, we acknowledge that the study has used vignettes with

newspaper articles but has not observed citizens' reaction to an actually perceived service failure.

Finally, it has to be noted that we use a relatively small sample in this study. However, we reduced the danger of false-positive findings by planning the sample size based on an a priori power analysis for a medium effect size of $d = 0.5$. Although the relatively high amount of excluded observations resulting from the failed attention check has reduced the power of our tests, we perceive the power to be sufficient as we had planned conservatively and used two-tailed tests for one-tailed hypotheses. A one-tailed power-analysis would ideally contain a sample size of 51 observations per group, which is what we have provided in this study. In addition, with effects of $d = 0.63$ and $d = 0.92$, our results regarding the effect of public opinion in favor or against blame lie well above the assumed effect size. We, therefore, perceive the power of these two effects to be sufficient. The effect of pre-existing blame, however, seems to be smaller and our study might not have provided enough power to safely assume such an effect.

Nevertheless, the observed influence of social pressure on citizens' blame presents meaningful insights for scholars in the field of public administration. The results indicate that the social context influences citizens' blame. Conformity leads to considerable variation in citizens' blame attribution. Consequently, these findings have implications on other objectives in public administration research. It is reasonable to assume that conformity and social influence have a similar influence on other public sector problem areas; all interactions between citizens and the public sector could be affected. Moreover, attitudinal and behavioral differences in the context of public service failure are more comprehensible if one utilizes a social psychology perspective and a citizen-centered research approach.

Conclusion

This article enhances contemporary knowledge of citizens' behaviors: it specifically makes key contributions to public administration research on citizen participation and citizens' blame. First, the research provides vital insights into the attribution of blame for public service failure. Since blame is linked to uncertainty, we suggest that social influence plays a major role in its emergence. The empirical results show that conformity is indeed an important force relating to the intensity and amount of citizens' blame attribution for public service failure. This is especially true regardless of whether public opinion favors blaming or rejects it. Consequently, in the public sector, the implications of blame attribution need to be differentiated. Blaming is not always based on citizens' realistic assessment. Furthermore, blame is highly dependent on the specific context and social factors. This leads to the conclusion that blame is not constant but varies with context and over time. These considerations suggest that an analytic approach to citizens' blame is required.

As the second contribution, we identify the general complexity that the public sector faces regarding citizens' blame. Our findings call for an integration of social influence into the existing discourse on citizens' blame. Future research should analyze if public opinion and pre-existing blame influence politicians' success when they implement strategies to avoid citizens' blame. In this regard, scholars need to draw on social psychology and developmental psychology research. Further, our findings have implications for broader research on citizen participation and other fields of study that examine the interaction between the public sector and its citizens, since conformity likely does not only occur with regard to the act of blaming.

Third, the findings and considerations emphasize the current understanding of citizens' blame and the underlying, linked processes. The theoretical model cannot adequately

describe blame since it does not consider the social context and external environmental conditions. Therefore, further research is, therefore, needed to extend the understanding of the blame game, as it were; these would provide an accurate understanding of citizens' blame and how it is embedded in citizen-state interactions.

This article also provides practical suggestions for public sector officials confronted with citizens' blame. The empirical findings show that, in general, information on public service failure and citizens' behavior influence citizens. Therefore, practitioners need to analyze the available information along with traditional and social media coverage, in order to anticipate potential blame occurrence. In this regard, providing additional information on possible failures and perceived avoidable harms could be vital. Previous research suggests that communication has a positive influence on citizen' behaviors in critical situations (for example Innes & Booher, 2004, p. 427). Furthermore, given the rich discourse on libertarian paternalism and 'nudges' (Hansen & Jespersen, 2013), first-hand information does have potential advantages. The way information is verbalized has a major influence on the resulting perceptions (Piotrowski, Grimmelikhuijsen, & Deat, 2017) and, consequently, on citizens' blame. Various studies find that framing effects have a major influence in a crisis situation (Cho & Gower, 2006, p. 171; Coombs, 2007, p. 422), which is very similar to public service failure. Therefore, public organizations should not only provide first-hand information but also foster positive framing to influence citizens' blame.

Furthermore, the conformity effect implies that blame attributed in the public sphere is relevant since it can only influence others' behavior if it is perceivable. Consequently, public organizations need to provide various opportunities for direct and individual blame attribution. This includes the availability of trained staff and fully accessible information technology complaint interfaces. Although the recommendation of adequate allegation management to improve citizen satisfaction is neither new nor innovative, it remains worthy of

emphasis (Halachmi & Greiling, 2013). Hence, merely understanding the underlying perceived avoidable harm could already lead to adequate solutions.

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Appendix

Appendix A: Measures

Variable	Operationalization
Blame Attribution (α = 0.91) (adapted from James et al. 2016)	• How much do you think local politicians are responsible for the given situation in the registration offices? (0 = Not at all responsible; 100 = Completely responsible) • How much do you think the given situation is local politicians' fault? (0 = Not at all politicians' fault; 100 = Completely politicians' fault) • To what extent do you think local politicians are deserving blame for the following? ... (0 =Deserving no blame at all; 100 = Completely deserving blame) ◦ ... Time management regarding the appointments for citizens? ◦ ... Certainty that citizens receive substantial service on time? ◦ ... Amount of employees that are working in the registration offices? • Overall, to what extent do you believe local politicians are deserving blame for the waiting times as displayed to you earlier? (0 =Deserving no blame at all; 100 = Completely deserving blame) • Overall, to what extent are you willing to attribute blame to local politicians for the waiting times as displayed earlier? (0 = Not at all willing; Completely willing = 100)
Age	[2017 –] What year were you born?
Gender	How do you describe your gender identity? (1 = Female/ 0 = Male/ Other)
Visited municipal service center	Did you attend a registration office in the last 12 months? (0 = No; 1 = Yes)
Perception of quality of service (α = 0.84) (adapted from James et al. 2016)	• What do you think of the quality of the presented registration offices regarding the following aspects as presented before? ◦ ...For the time management regarding the appointments for citizens? ◦ ...For the certainty that citizens receive substantial service on time? ◦ ...For the amount of staff that is working in the registration offices? • Overall, what do you think of the quality of the waiting time for appointments in registration offices as presented before? (0 = Extremely poor; 100 = Extremely good)
Political Orientation (Kroh, 2007)	In politics people sometimes talk of 'left' and 'right'. Where would you place yourself on a scale from 0 to 10? (0 = extreme left, 10 = extreme right)

Appendix B. Vignettes

Vignette (Newspaper Article):

Please take a look at the given information carefully to ensure an adequate understanding.

Imagine you lived in Hamburg and would be confronted with the following information:

Registration offices in Hamburg – Standard bureaucratic procedure or unreasonable time waste?

It is an ordinary Monday afternoon in one of Hamburg's many registration offices. The waiting area is packed with young families, older couples and debating middle-aged men. The info-monitor mounted on one of the walls announces that there are currently 17 more people waiting for their turn at one of the registration desks.

The impact of bureaucracy

If you are a citizen of Hamburg and currently in need of a new passport, ID-card or a certificate of registration, you need a lot of free time on your hands. Instead of using that time, you will spend it in front of a computer monitor waiting for the online scheduling tool to process your information. The program will give you an appointment at some point during the next 6-8 weeks at a random registration office somewhere in Hamburg. Not to mention the time spent waiting in person at the registration office until your ticket number is finally displayed.

Service Center	Average Waiting Time in Days (April 2016)
Service Center 1	53
Service Center 2	56
Service Center 3	34
Service Center 4	44
Service Center 5	58
Service Center 6	41
Service Center 7	47
Service Center 8	52
Service Center 9	53
Service Center 10	56
Service Center 11	52
Service Center 12	55
Service Center 13	54
Service Center 14	57
Service Center 15	54
Service Center 16	52
Service Center 17	56
Service Center 18	48

Figure 3: Source: Authors. Available at
https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.8306210 under a CC-BY 4.0 license

In the following, you will find information that is drawn from newspapers and the internet regarding the reactions from citizens.

Please read the statements on this screen carefully.

A considerably high number of citizens in Hamburg need to get an appointment at the registration offices in Hamburg. This condition exists due to several different issues that the citizens are facing every day. The long waiting periods are a major problem for the citizens. They are just not able to plan the necessity of an appointment six weeks in advance.

Treatment 1:
The citizens are very upset because the situation is not changing and the responsible politicians don't seem to care about this problem. Since the citizens think that the politicians don't care about the problem they are in favor of criticism in any form that forces the politicians to recognize the problem. They should be blamed for their failure.

Treatment 2:
Nevertheless, the citizens are very understanding towards the employees of the registration offices and the political leaders in Hamburg. They are not willing to blame the responsible persons for the given issues, mainly because people are aware that blaming doesn't seem very helpful. The stress in the administration is already very high due to lack of employees. The responsible individuals should be able to concentrate on solving the given problem instead of struggling with accusations.

Treatment 3:
There is a strong response to the problem of waiting times by the citizens. As a reaction some citizens started a petition to move the responsible politicians to solve the given problem. Further activities include several newspaper articles and blog posts that foster allegations towards the politicians because they name the problem and the responsible politicians. In addition, 500 citizens started a public campaign which is present in parliamentary sessions and other political contexts.

Treatment 4:
Nevertheless, there is no response to the problem of waiting times by the citizens.

Control Treatment:
There is no information available. Please move on to the next section

Appendix C. CONSORT flow chat

Enrollment

Assessed for eligibility
(n = 5,125)

Random Assignment
(n = 5,125)

Allocation

Assigned to comparison group (Control)
(n = 1,025)

Received comparison manipulation
(n = 74)

Did not receive experimental manipulation (did not respond in time)
(n = 958)

Assigned to experimental group (Public opinion in favor of blaming)
(n = 1,025)

Received experimental manipulation
(n = 64)

Did not receive experimental manipulation (did not respond in time)
(n = 965)

Assigned to experimental group (Public opinion not in favor of blaming)
(n = 1,025)

Received experimental manipulation
(n = 74)

Did not receive experimental manipulation (did not respond in time)
(n = 959)

Assigned to experimental group (High intensity of pre-existing blame)
(n = 1,025)

Received experimental manipulation
(n = 70)

Did not receive experimental manipulation (did not respond in time)
(n = 960)

Assigned to experimental group (No pre-existing blame)
(n = 1,025)

Received experimental manipulation
(n = 80)

Did not receive experimental manipulation (did not respond in time)
(n = 956)

Follow-up

Discontinued participation
(n = 7)
Reason: Canceled answering survey

Discontinued participation
(n = 3)
Reason: Canceled answering survey

Discontinued participation
(n = 8)
Reason: Canceled answering survey

Discontinued participation
(n = 5)
Reason: Canceled answering survey

Discontinued participation
(n = 11)
Reason: Canceled answering survey

Analysis

Analyzed (n = 48)

Excluded from analysis
(n = 19)
Reasons: Failed attention check

Analyzed (n = 50)

Excluded from analysis
(n = 11)
Reasons: Failed attention check (n = 10), flippant answers (n = 1)

Analyzed (n = 51)

Excluded from analysis
(n = 15)
Reasons: Failed attention check

Analyzed (n = 56)

Excluded from analysis
(n = 9)
Reasons: Failed attention check

Analyzed (n = 56)

Excluded from analysis
(n = 13)
Reasons: Failed attention check

Figure 4: CONSORT flow chart. Source: Authors. Available at https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.8306219 under a CC-BY 4.0 license.

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Appendix D. Correlations

Table 4: Correlations

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
(1) Citizens' blame	1				
(2) Age	0.24	1			
(3) Gender (1 = female)	-0.01	-0.22	1		
(4) Visited municipal service center	-0.02	-0.10	0.04	1	
(5) Perception of quality of service	-0.18	-0.05	-0.05	0.09	1
(6) Political orientation (0 = extreme left)	-0.03	0.03	-0.09	-0.09	-0.04

All correlations are Pearson's *r*