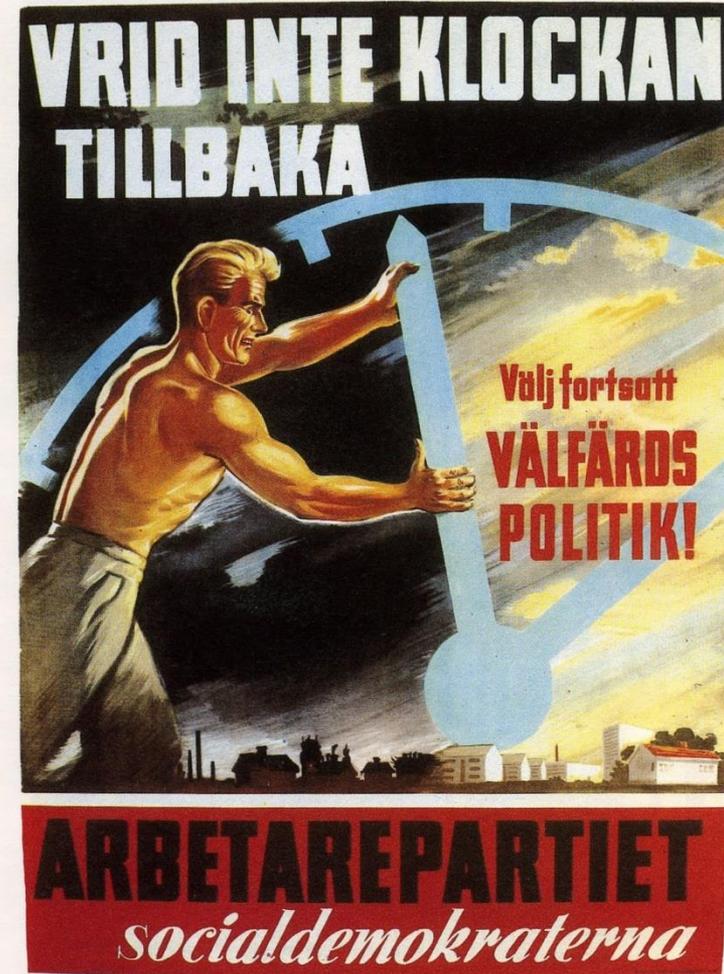
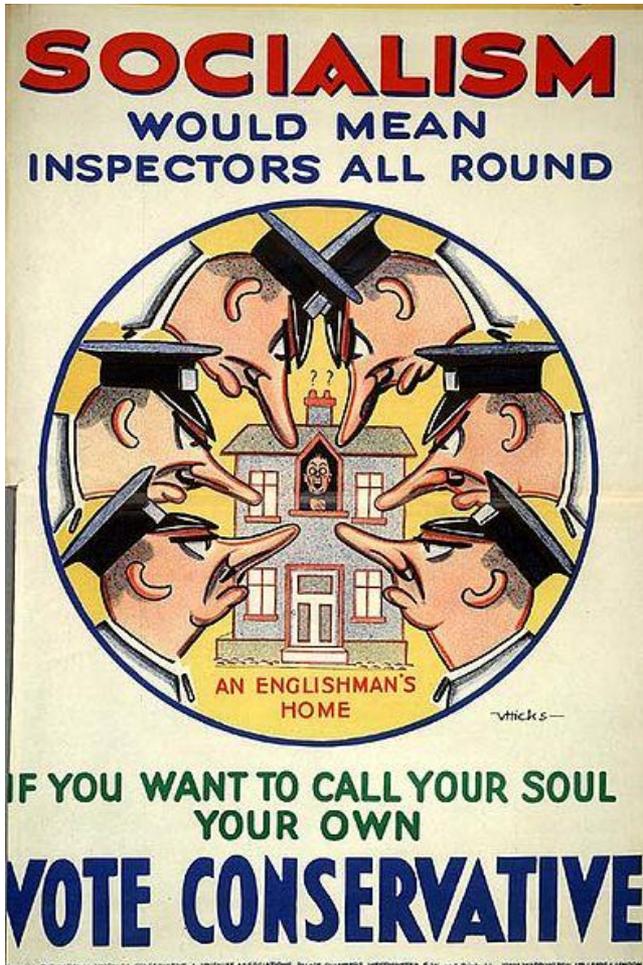


Generating Blame in Policy and Politics



R. Kent Weaver

Georgetown University and The Brookings institution

Overall argument:

- **Decisions to generate blame or forego doing so are strategic decisions by boundedly rational actors**
- **Strategic decisions are shaped by the macro environment**
- **Blame-generating has both policy and political consequences**

Outline:

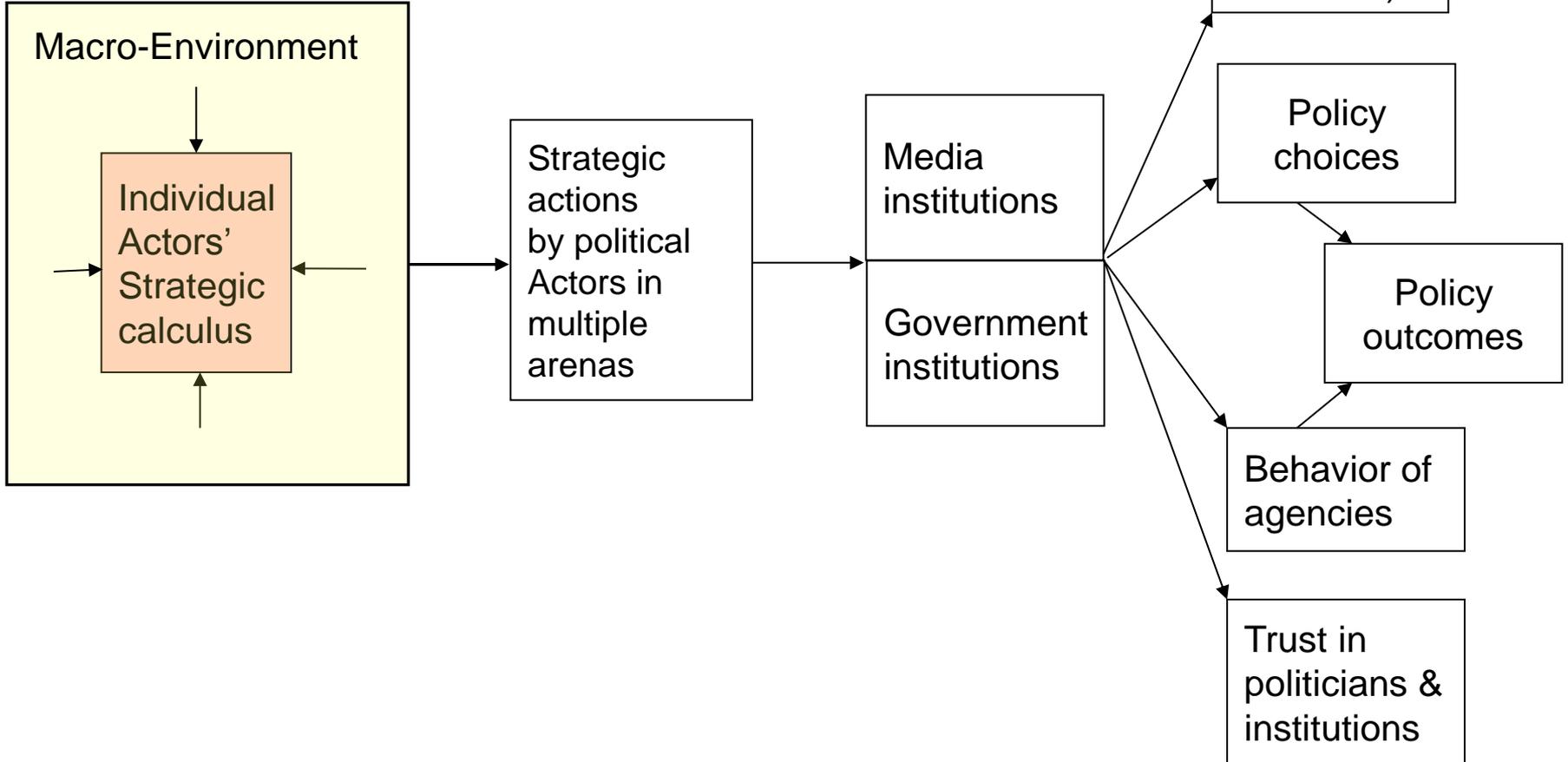
- 1. What is blame-generating (or negative messaging?)**
- 2. Why does it occur: the micro-foundations**
- 3. Multiple "arenas" and spillover effects**
- 4. How macro-environments shape blame-generating in the U.S. and Sweden**
- 5. Blame-generating in policymaking: the case of public pensions**
- 6. Conclusions**

Micro-foundations
Imbedded in and filtered
through Macro-environment

Strategic
choices

Filtered
through

Policy and Political/
Institutional
Consequences,
including



What is Blame-Generating (and what is not)?

Definition of Blame-generating (or negative messaging):

1. Intentional conveying of a message about one or more identifiable “targets” to one or more core audiences
2. Messages include explicit or implicit attribution of responsibility on the part of the target
3. Planned by one or more perpetrators
4. And delivered by one or more messengers
5. Negative messages may relate to:

A. Past decisions or actions that imposed losses on the audience

**I DOUBLED
THE NATIONAL DEBT
LET ME DO IT AGAIN**

Or vote for change. Vote Conservative



**I CAUSED RECORD
YOUTH
UNEMPLOYMENT
LET ME DO IT AGAIN**

Or vote for change. Vote Conservative

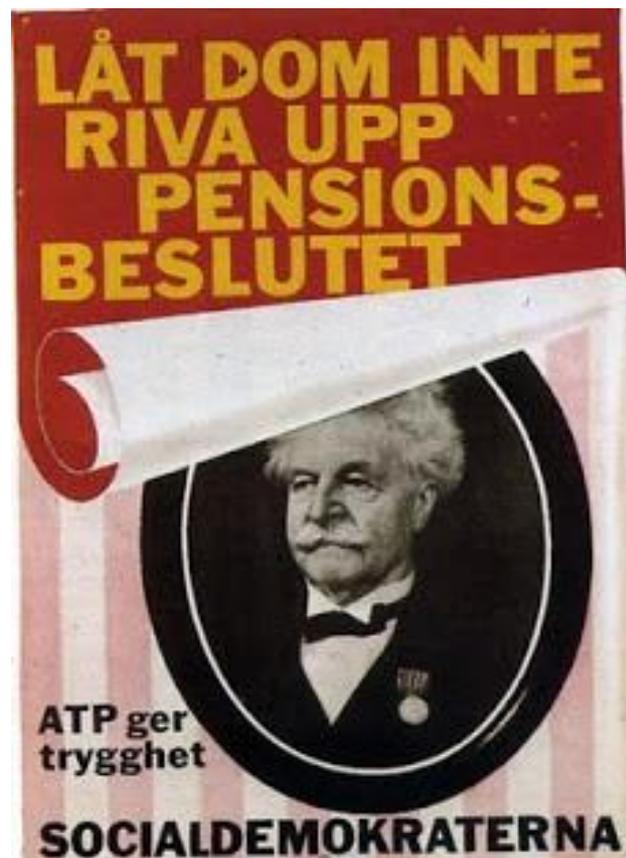


**I INCREASED
THE GAP BETWEEN
RICH AND POOR
LET ME DO IT AGAIN**

Or vote for change. Vote Conservative



B. Potential future outcomes based on target policy preferences that are distant from those of the audience



C. Character flaws (regardless of policy consequences)—e.g.,

- Incompetence, lack of qualifications, experience, or leadership abilities**
- Lack of interest in the public's problems**
- Hypocrisy, dishonesty or inconsistency**
- Personal immoral or illegal behavior**
- Or just being a politician**

**Negative
messages may
be true but need
not be...**



SVERIGES KVINNOR!

En var som röstar på "arbetarepartiet," röstar för familjebandens upplösning, barnens förvildning, och sedernas förfall.

Perpetrators, messengers and beneficiaries are often the same entity but may not be (and third party attacks may be more effective*)

*** Deborah Jordan Brooks and Michael Murov, "Assessing Accountability in a Post-Citizens United Era: The Effects of Attack Ad Sponsorship by Unknown Independent Groups," *American Politics Research* (May 2012) 40: 383-418**

What negative messaging is

not:

Negative messaging is distinct from

– Lobbying (providing information)
or

– extortion (e.g., threatening to generate blame)

because the reactions of one or more audiences distinct from the target are part of the calculus

Multiple Blame-Generating “Arenas” (and Spillover Effects)

Negative messaging may occur in multiple but overlapping “arenas”, including:

- 1. Election campaigns**
- 2. “Permanent Campaign” of party competition and “brand-building”**
- 3. Setting the Policy Agenda**
- 4. Policy Formulation and Adoption**
- 5. Policy implementation**
- 6. Judicial & Executive nominations**

As well as:

- **Defining “pariah” parties and selecting coalition partners in parliamentary systems (e.g., Die Linke, Sweden Democrats)**

Blame-generating in distinctive policy/political arenas may have:

- 1. Different perpetrators**
- 2. Different objectives and time frames**
- 3. Different targets, audiences and strategies for achieving objectives**
- 4. Different prevalence of negative messaging**

(see chart)

The Micro-Political Environment: The Blame- Generating Calculus

The electoral Calculus:

Politicians are boundedly-rational actors who have both electoral and policy objectives:

Politicians have three basic strategies to win support from voters:

1. Claim credit



LO slogan in the 2002 election: "I am proud, but not content"

2. Avoid or deflect blame....

....which becomes harder the longer you have been in office

And mostly gives voters a reason not to vote against you

3. Generate blame

LABOUR ISN'T WORKING.

UNEMPLOYMENT
OFFICE

A large crowd of people, mostly in silhouette, is shown standing in a long line that curves across the bottom of the image. The people are of various ages and are dressed in formal or semi-formal attire. The line starts on the left and extends towards the right, where it begins to curve upwards and away from the viewer, suggesting a long queue of people waiting at an unemployment office.

BRITAIN'S BETTER OFF WITH THE CONSERVATIVES.

Blame-generating will only occur when a boundedly-rational perpetrator believes that benefits outweigh costs:

Potential electoral benefits include:

- **Inducing defections from or demobilizing supporters of target or those who are neutral**
- **Solidifying and mobilizing perpetrators' base of support**
- **Scapegoating/deflecting blame**

Potential policy benefits include:

- **Getting government to modify or drop a proposal**
- **Blocking or altering policy implementation**

But blame-generating also has potential costs, including:

- 1) Negative policy or political consequences for perpetrator or beneficiary**
 - Retribution from target**
 - Alienation of some elements of audience**
 - Weakening cooperation needed to achieve objectives in other arenas**
- 2) Opportunity costs—other uses of scarce resources**
- 3) Externalities (costs to functioning of institutions)—are not directly borne by and thus unlikely to be considered by perpetrators**

An Analytical Puzzle—Prospect theory suggests several reasons to expect a lot of negative messaging:

- 1. Individuals' perceptions can be manipulated by “framing”--Almost all policies have costs as well as benefits, and opponents can focus on costs in their framing**
- 2. Individuals weigh losses more heavily than gains**
- 3. Individuals pay more attentive to negative information than to positive information**
- 4. Inattentive voters may attribute responsibility for bad outcomes even when it is beyond target's control**

...But also reasons for expecting little negative messaging activity:

- **Blame-Avoiding politicians:**
 - Have strong incentives to avoid blame
 - Reasonably well-informed and efficient at positioning themselves to
 - Can minimize blame through blame management strategies—e.g., taking positions close to median voters, scapegoating

Plus:

- **Reliance on competitors for cooperation in some arenas (e.g., government formation, policy adoption) creates disincentives for generating blame**

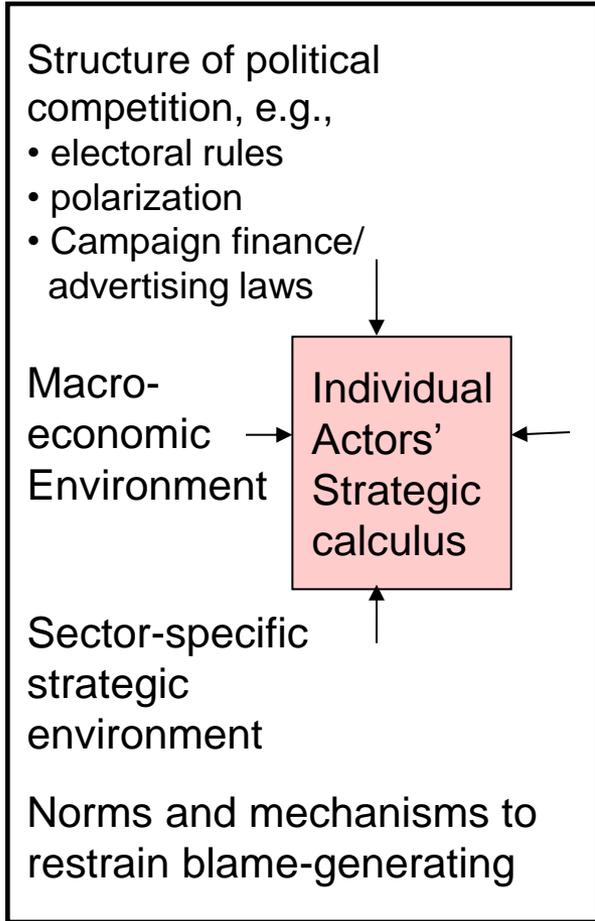
Because theoretical expectations conflict:

- **Expect no single equilibrium level of blame generating**
 - within or across political systems
 - over time
 - Across different "arenas" (e.g., election campaigns versus policy implementation) within a country
- **Prevalence of blame-generating is likely to be conditional on features of the macro-environment**

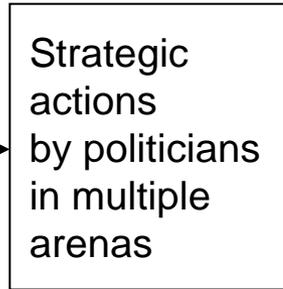
The Macro Environment

Micro-foundations

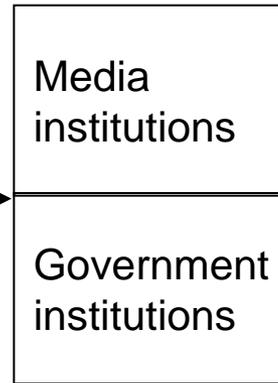
Imbedded in and filtered through Macro-environment



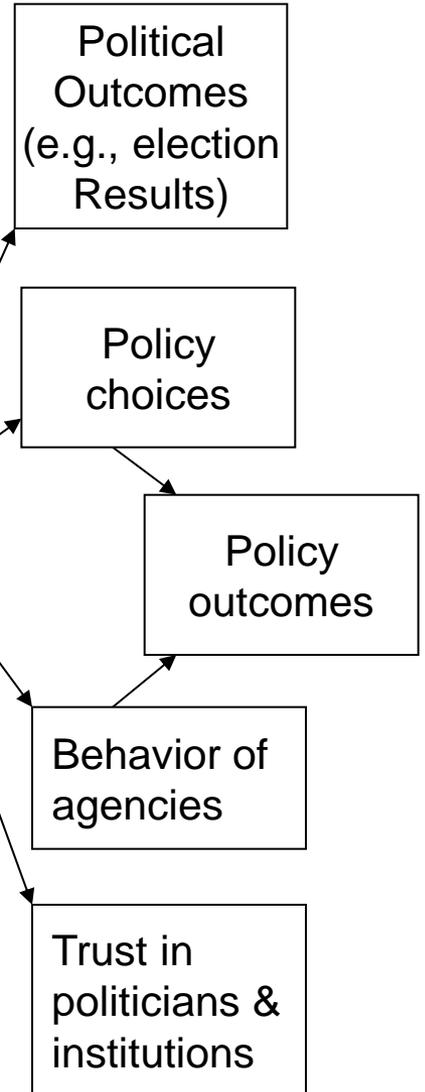
Strategic choices



Filtered through



Policy and Political/ Institutional Consequences, including



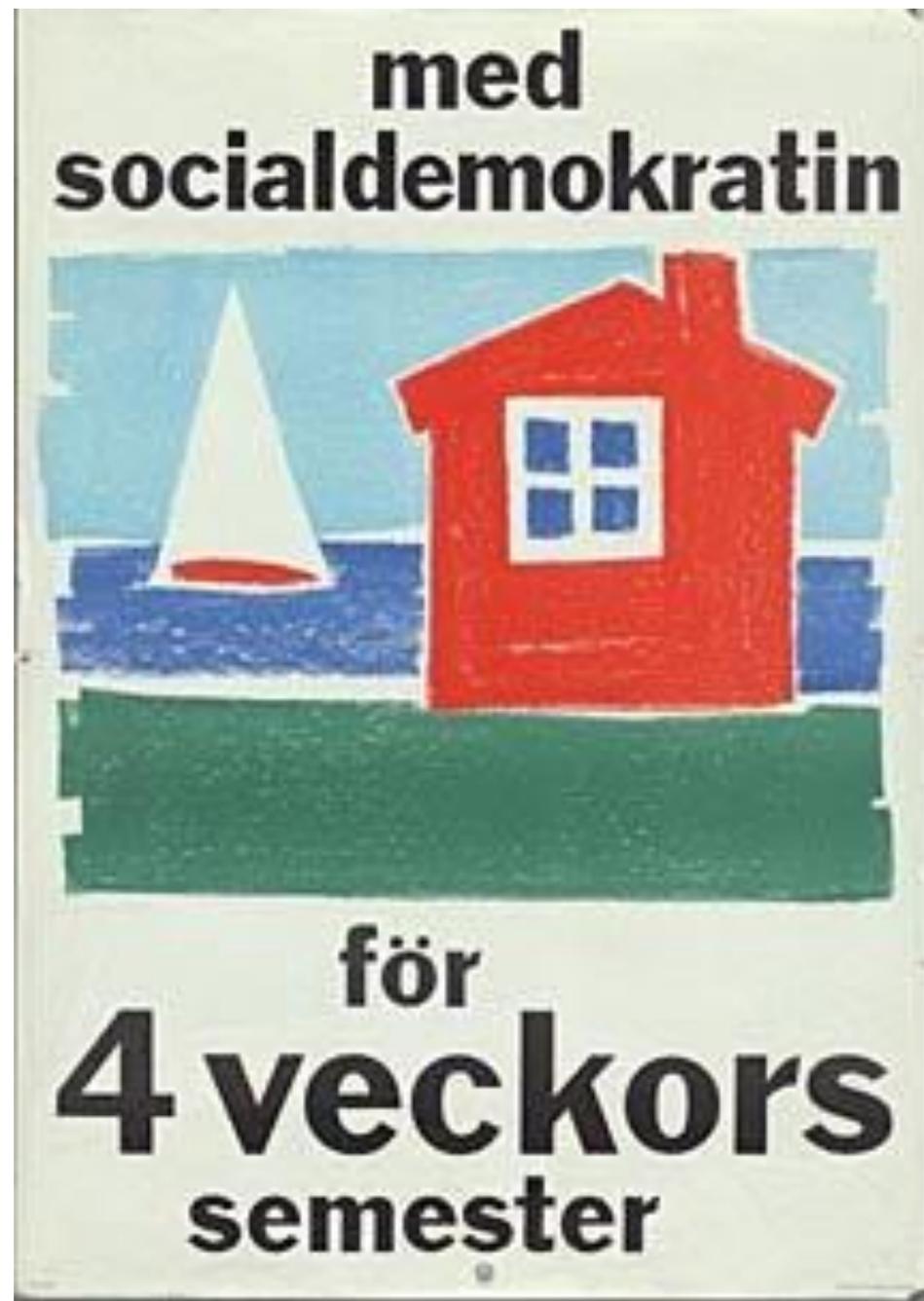
“Politics of permanent austerity”^{*} limits alternatives to blame-generating:

- **Slower growth ends fiscal slack for program expansion**
- **Population aging means higher pension and health care costs**

^{*} See Paul Pierson, “Coping with Permanent Austerity: Welfare State Restructuring in Affluent Democracies,” *Revue française de sociologie*, Vol. 43, No. 2 (Apr. - Jun., 2002), pp. 369-406

Leading to:

- **Fewer credit-claiming opportunities to propose new programs with broad benefits**



- **More pressure on governments to reduce spending...**

- ...which creates more blame-generating opportunities

**I TOOK BILLIONS
FROM PENSIONS
LET ME DO IT AGAIN**

Or vote for change. Vote Conservative



The Macro-Environment for Blame-Generating in the U.S.

**Both enduring institutional
features and some trends create
opportunities for negative
messaging....**

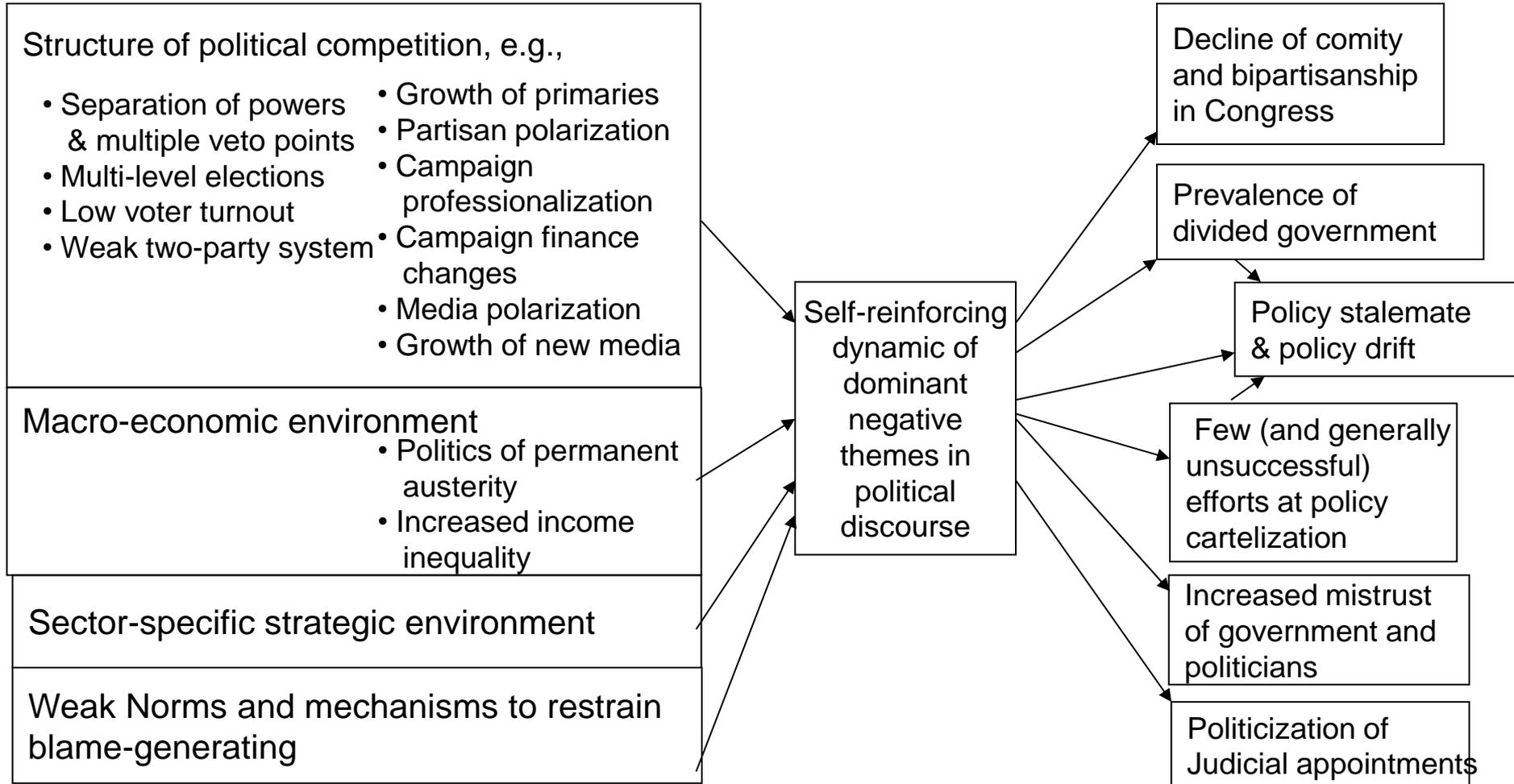
Blame-generating environment in U.S.

Semi-permanent elements
of U.S. Macro-environment

Changing elements of
U.S. Macro-environment

Strategic
choices

Policy and Political/Institutional
Consequences, including



Shifts in electorates and districts change the audience composition for individual politicians:

- **Politicians change electorates between primary and general election**
- **Politicians shift electorates when they seek higher office (e.g., from House to Senate or governorship)**

Intraparty-competition, shifting electorates, career path uncertainty and need to think short-term all increase vulnerability to blame-generating

Increased legislative party cohesion lessens legislators' room for maneuver:

- Legislators increasingly feel pressure to vote on legislation framed in line with party positions rather than constituency opinion**

Growth of primaries and turnout politics lessens politicians' room to maneuver:

- **Need to mobilize base pulls candidates away from median voter positions and issue avoidance, leading to blame-generating opportunities**

**Growth of independent interest groups
that monitor and report on “blame-
worthy” actions by policymakers
lessens room to maneuver**

Growth of more partisan broadcast media:

- **Lowers cost of sending negative messages**
- **Increases ability to “narrowcast” (or micro-target) attacks to those who are most receptive**

Prevalence of divided government in recent decades fosters negative messaging in several ways:

- **Increases congressional investigations of executive**
- **Increases propensity to legislative stalemate, which:**
 - **lessens credit-claiming opportunities**
 - **facilitates charges of congressional ineffectiveness and “running against Congress”**

Campaign Professionals encourage negative politics*

* Peter Francia and Paul. and Herrnson, “Keeping it Professional: The Influence of Political Consultants on Candidate Attitudes toward Negative Campaigning.” *Politics & Policy*, 35 (2007): 246–272.

Mistrust in government and blame-generating are mutually reinforcing:

Mistrust in government:

- **Provides fertile ground for negative messages to be viewed as credible, and therefore more effective**
- **Republican belief that mistrust in government fit their ideological ends lowered costs to them of engaging in negative messaging**

Reforming Public Pensions in the United States and Sweden

Both countries have faced a severe decline in the ratio of workers to retirees....

...and a decline in fertility rates (though still above the OECD average)

But with very different outcomes:

U.S.:

- **Retrenchment and payroll tax increase in 1983**
- **Stalemate and inaction since 1983**

Sweden:

- **Incremental retrenchment through early 1990s**
- **Major system reform enacted between 1992 and 2000**
- **System largely maintained since then with modest changes**

Hypothesis: Countries' capacity to impose and sustain concentrated losses in pension policy will vary:

- **Inversely with resources and diversity of potential sources of blame-generating**
- **Inversely with capacity of decisionmakers to insulate themselves from blame**

As well as:

- **Number of veto points in the system**

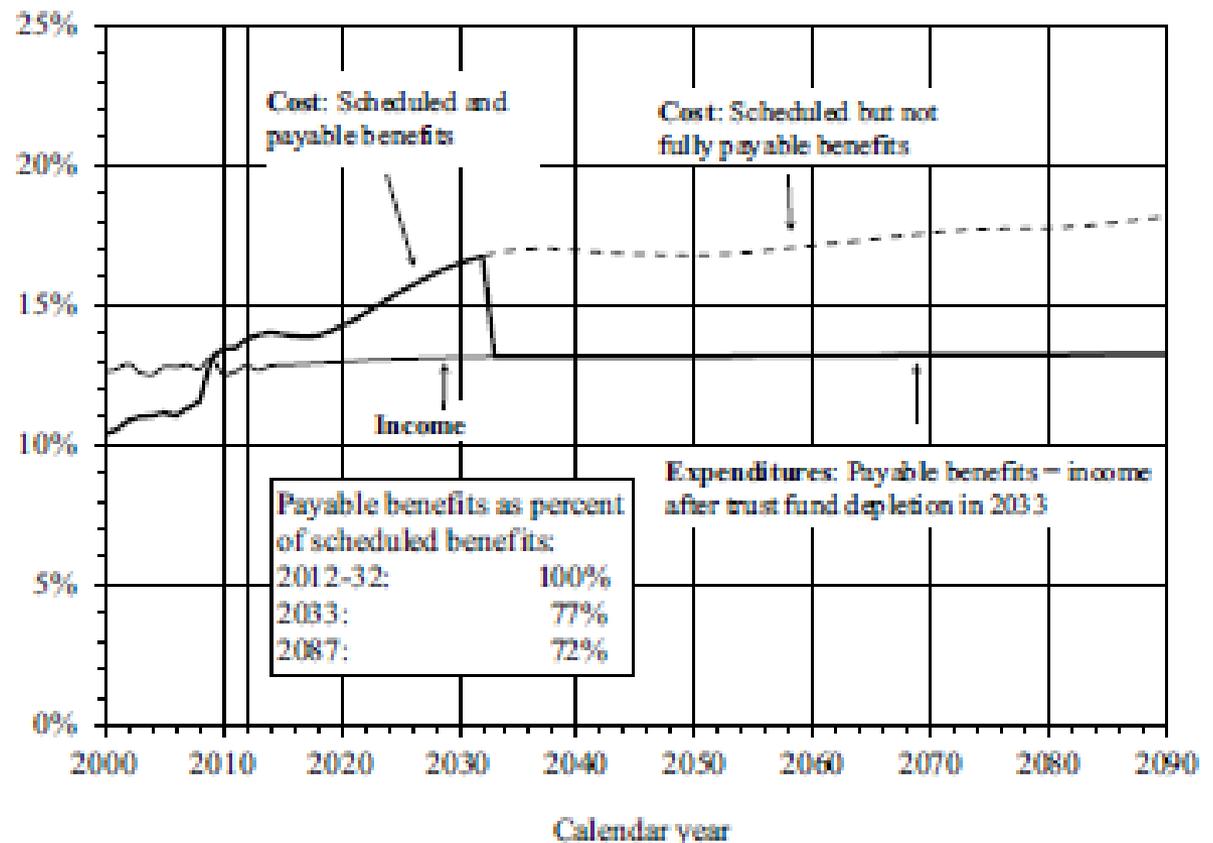
Strategic Action in U.S. Social Security Reform: the “Bush 43” administration

A 1983 reform of Social Security to increase its solvency was negotiated by a bipartisan commission



But by the 1990s, major long-term deficits were projected

Figure ILD2.—OASDI Income, Cost, and Expenditures as Percentages of Taxable Payroll
[Under Intermediate Assumptions]



Issue framing by proponents of the Bush administration reform proposal:

- **current Social Security system was out of control...**
- **the President's plan was no more "risky" than doing nothing, with a compelling need to address problems now rather than later**
- **Social Security was criticized as unfair to younger generations**
- **The Bush administration portrayed Democrats as irresponsible in not presenting an alternative proposal**

Issue framing by reform opponents:

- 1. Emphasis on the riskiness of investing in the stock market**
- 2. Claim that Bush wanted to cut Social Security to pay for tax cuts**
- 3. Criticism of “scare-mongering” by the Bush administration**
- 4. Portrayed administration as a tool of the wealthy and Wall Street**

Proponents of reform sought to portray senior lobbies as:

- **As self-interested bullies**
- **as partisans**
- **as politically leftist with a hidden agenda**

using new and existing conservative organizations to carry the message

In 2001 Bush administration tried to control policy formulation through a “bipartisan” commission with clear guidelines including:

- **No increase in Social Security payroll tax**
- **No change in Social Security benefits for retirees or near-retirees.**
- **Individually controlled, voluntary personal retirement accounts must be included**

But would it be perceived as legitimate?



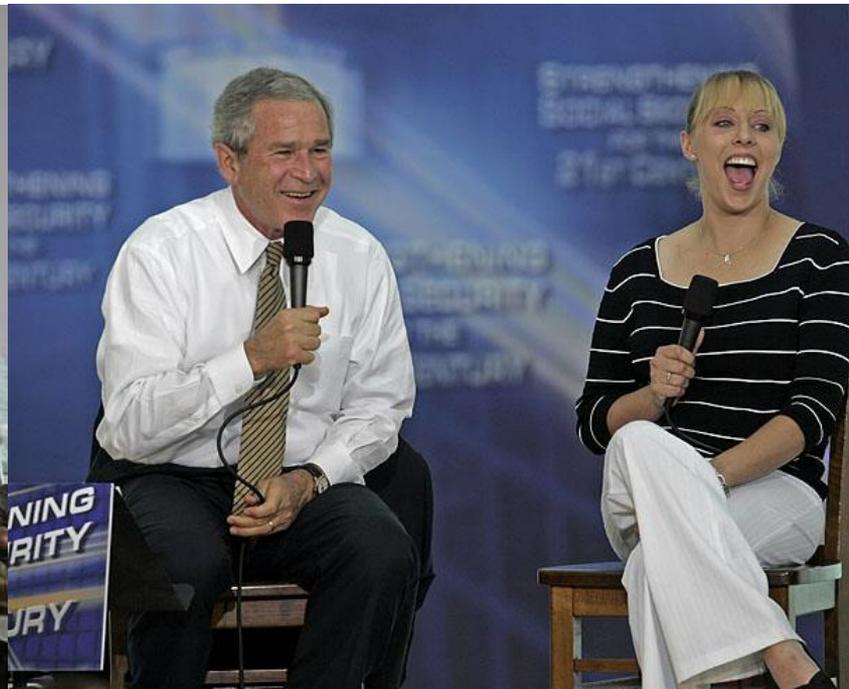
The Bush Commission proposed three options with varying combinations of:

- Cutbacks in “traditional” Social Security benefits to future retirees (especially those who are very young today), including those who do not opt out into individual accounts**
- Optional individual accounts financed with carve-out of part of Social Security payroll tax**
- Transfers from general revenues to make up shortfall in Social Security trust funds**

Bush Commission's proposals died as Congressional Republicans backed away as the 2002 election approached (anticipatory blame-avoiding)

Agenda setting in 2005:

President Bush put his personal prestige on the line with a series of carefully controlled public “forums” and managed events in early 2005....



**....that critics argued were
unrepresentative media events**

**....so they protested outside,
which got heavy media coverage**

**Without a commission as an insulating
device to formulate policy in 2005,
President Bush needed Congress to take
a more active role...**

**But Congressional Republicans were
very nervous since they would incur
all the blame...**

**...and became more reluctant as it was
clear that the President was making no
progress in convincing the public**

The President was unable to get congressional Democrats to make a concrete counterproposal

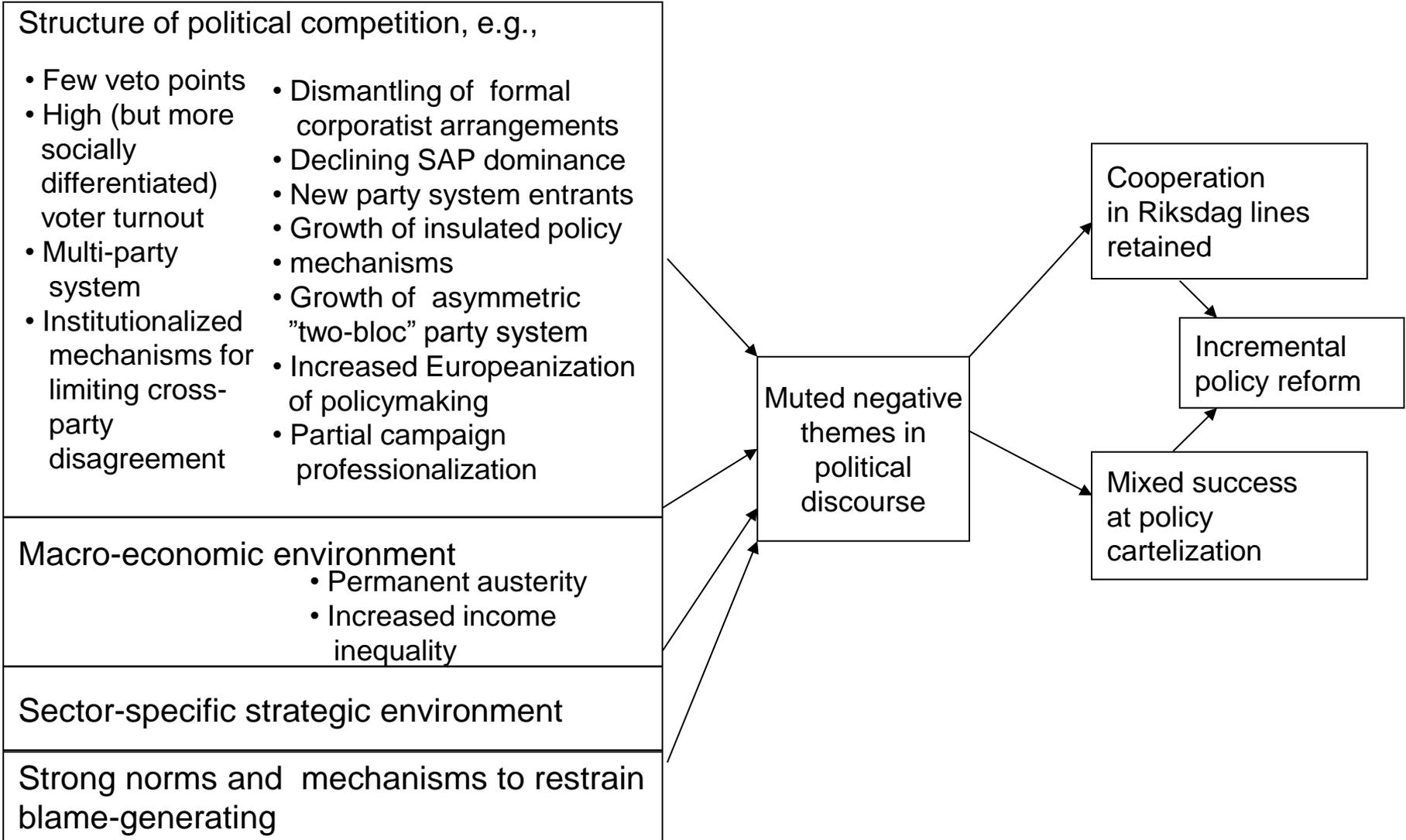
Without backing from Congressional Republicans, Bush backed away from Social Security reform...

The Macro- Environment for Blame-Generating in Sweden



Blame-generating environment in Sweden

Semi-permanent elements of Swedish Macro-environment Changing elements of Swedish Macro-environment Strategic choices Policy and Political/Institutional Consequences, including



Sources: See especially Stefan Svallfors, "Politics as Organized Combat—New Players and New Rules in Sweden"

Blame-generating in Swedish politics and policymaking is constrained by:

- **Restrictions on campaign advertising**
- **Absence of party primaries where preference outliers are disproportionately important**
- **Less politicized media environment**
- **Need for (and tradition of) inter-party and cross-bloc cooperation in the Riksdag**

•See: Jesper Strömbäck and Adam Shehata, “Structural Biases in British and Swedish Election News Coverage,” *Journalism Studies*, Vol. 8, Iss. 5, 2007; Stefan Svallfors, “Politics as Organized Combat—New Players and New Rules in Sweden”

- **Move of the Moderate Party toward the center and need of Social Democratic governments to retrench**

**“I didn’t
become a
conservative
because I
believe in the
idea of
revolution”**

Quoted in Anders Lindbom, “The Swedish Conservative Party and the Welfare State: Institutional Change and Adapting Preferences,” *Government and Opposition*, 43 (2008): 539–560.

- **Norms and expectations of civility among Swedish voters?**

Swedish election campaigns have been increasingly professionalized but:

- **Less than in the United States**
- **Unevenly across parties (highest for Social Democrats, lowest for Greens)**
- **Is constrained by a Swedish "culture of amateurism" valued by party members**

•See: Jesper Strömbäck (2009), "Selective Professionalisation of Political Campaigning: A Test of the Party-Centred Theory of Professionalised Campaigning in the Context of the 2006 Swedish Election." *Political Studies*, 57: 95–116; Lars W. Nord, "Still the Middle Way: A Study of Political Communication Practices in Swedish Election Campaigns," *The Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics*, 11 (Winter 2006): 64-76

Strategic Action in Swedish Pension Reform



Major features of the new Swedish pension system:

- **Universal tier replaced by minimum guarantee financed by general revenues**
- **Shift to notional defined contribution (NDC) in public pension tier with automatic balancing mechanism that shifts risk of poor economic performance and increased longevity from state to workers**
- **Mandatory individual account system**

Negotiation of the new Swedish pension system:

- **Negotiation within a five party working group**
- **Grass roots opposition within LO and SAP led to modest modifications, but did not change fundamental principles of reform**

See for example Urban Lundberg, *Juvelen I Kronan*, Karl Loxbo, "The fate of intra-party democracy: Leadership autonomy and activist influence in the mass party and the cartel party," *Party Politics*, 19 (July 2013): 537-554.



New Swedish Pension System has been largely sustained:

- **Balancing mechanism triggered pension cuts in 2010 and 2011 in run-up to 2010 election, but**
 - **Balancing mechanism revised to slow-down impact (fine-tuning)**
 - **Effects largely offset by changes in pension taxation**
- **Major parties remain committed to pensions accord and process**

Sweden's success in pension retrenchment is due in large part to:

- 1. successful" party cartelization of pension policymaking**
 - Avoids "first-mover" problem**
 - Allows deals to be made in private**
 - Weakens access of interest groups**
 - Facilitates trust-building**

2. Ability to withstand entry of new parties into the system without a pension “bidding war” breaking out because:

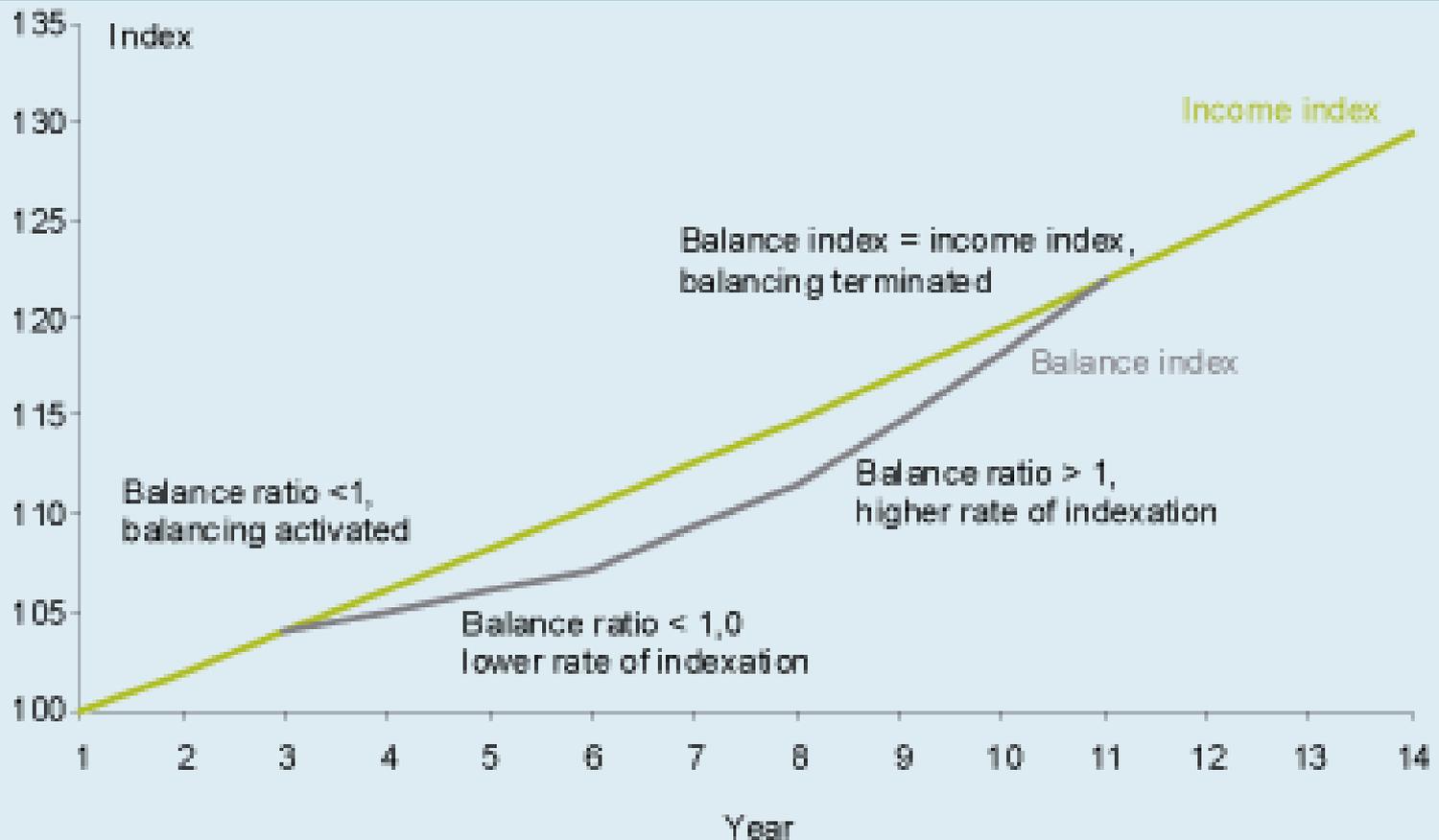
- Pensions remain a low priority for the Greens**
- Sweden Democrats remain a pariah party**
- Left Party remains outside government**

As well as:



3. An extremely opaque reform that obscures future losses

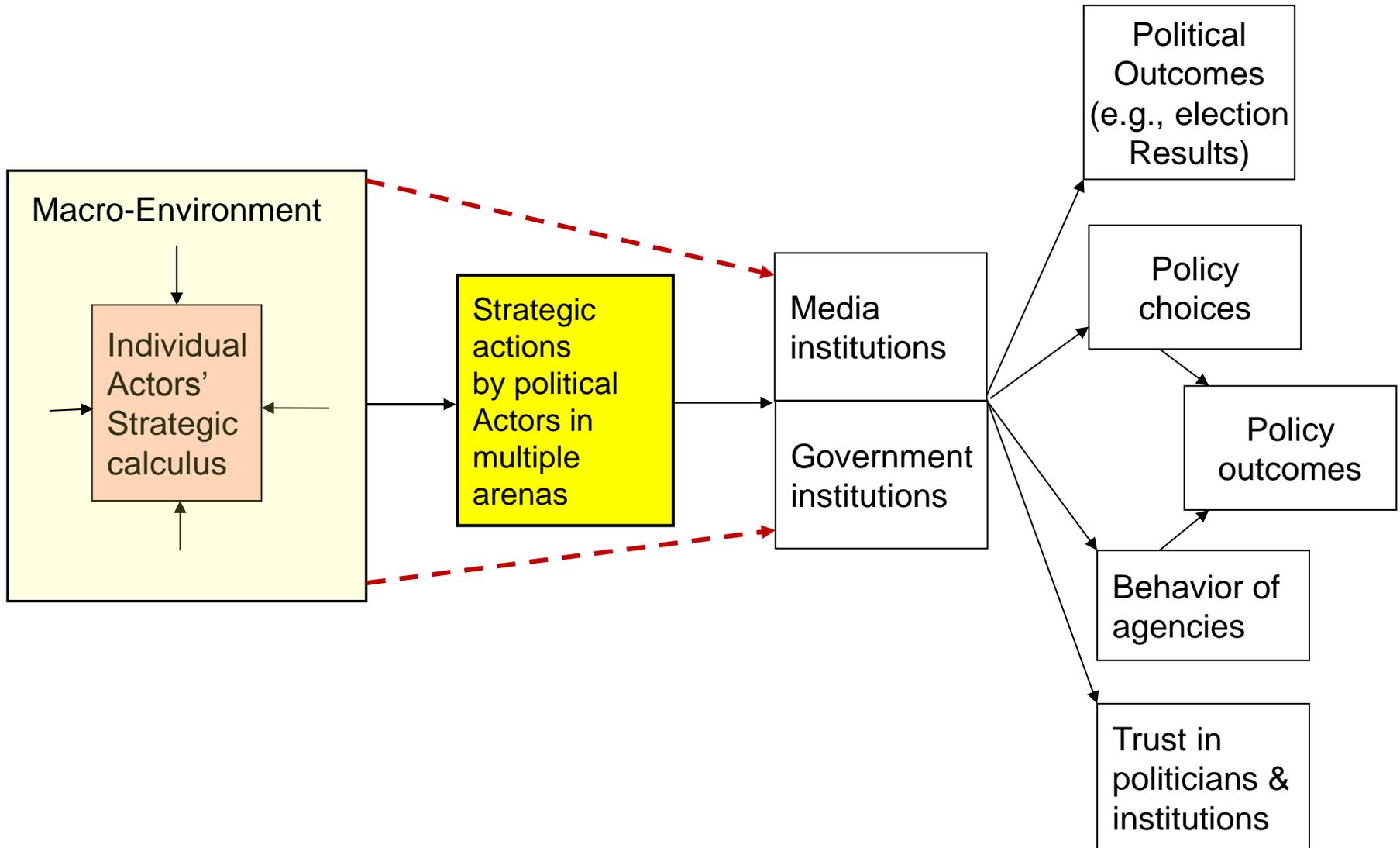
Figure 1. Illustration of the Balance Mechanism



- **But can this be sustained over time if “pariah parties” and client groups increase their role?**

See for example Jonas Larsson Taghizadeh and Anders Lindbom, “Protests against Welfare Retrenchment: Healthcare Restructuring in Sweden,” *Scandinavian Political Studies*, 37, 1 (2014) pp. 1-20.

Conclusions: Blame-Generating and the Policymaking Process



General conclusions:

- **Macro-environments play a critical role in the blame-generating calculus**
- **There are multiple "equilibrium" levels of blame-generating, and they can change over time within a system**
- **Blame-generating opportunities and levels appear to play an important role in mediating policy change**

Fear of blame-generating in the U.S.:

- **Keeps Social Security reform off the agenda for long periods**
- **Keeps politicians from being “first movers” for reform**
- **Inhibits compromise, because politicians fear attacks from their own political base**
- **Causes reform initiatives to be withdrawn, especially as elections near**

Muted blame-generating in Sweden:

- **Allowed cross-bloc agreement on a pension reform package that survived a change in government**
- **Facilitated near-exclusion of social partners**
- **Continued party cartel-like behavior helped to prevent threats to keeping threats to retrenchment mechanisms from reaching the agenda**

How generalizable are the results?

- To immigration policy?
- To education policy?
- To health care retrenchment?

- To other countries?

Studying blame-generating: Future Directions

1. Conceptually:

- Clearer definition of blame-generating that can be compared across arenas and political systems**
- Typology of blame-generating attacks and their specific political dynamics**

2. Measurement

- Better measurement of intensity of blame-generating messages**
- Better measures of incidence of negative messaging across arenas, jurisdictions, and over time.**

3. Specific empirical projects using multiple methodologies, e.g.:

- 1. Cross-system and over time comparisons of what types of negative messages are sent and by whom—e.g., intra versus cross-bloc**
- 2. Extension of arguments to different arenas—e.g.,**
 - coalition formation and framing of “pariah parties” in parliamentary systems**
 - legislative oversight of the executive (“fire alarms” versus “police patrols”)**

- 3. Cross-national analysis of formation and resilience of “policy cartels” and their efficacy in reducing negative messaging in specific sectors (e.g., pensions and health care, immigration)**
- 4. Extend to non-democratic polities**
- 5. Content analysis of negative messaging over time of rhetoric during:**
 - Confirmation hearings**
 - Legislative debates**
 - Presidential/Party leader debates**