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**Claiming Blame and Giving Credit:
Unintended Effects of How Government and Opposition
Frame the Europeanization of Welfare**

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Abstract

A framing experiment on the Europeanization of health care supports two assumptions derived from the “blame avoidance” literature. The *constrained perceptions assumption* states that performance evaluations at different political levels have “zero-sum” implications for each other. Empirically, those receiving positive integration frames not only become more positive about the EU level, but *also* more negative about domestic performance (even though frames about the such performance was not provided). The opposite is found for negative frames. Further, the *negative bias assumption* implies zero-sum adjustments are best triggered by negative blame frames than by positive “credit” frames. Finally, in contrast to standard blame avoidance assumptions the experiment mimics the realistic situation where the opposition attacks integrations and the government defends it. This reverses the prototypical blame avoidance situation and opens for *unintended* effects. Governments may paint EU-induced conditions in too rosy colours, reflecting negatively on domestic performance. Conversely, the opposition runs the risk of being too gloomy about integration for its own good, as negative EU-welfare frames reflect positively on domestic performance.

European integration was never supposed to challenge the welfare state arrangements of member states. Rather, “the Founding Fathers conceived of European integration as a project capable of creating and sustaining a virtuous circle between open economies and outward-looking economic policies on the one hand and closed welfare states and inward-looking social policy on the other” (Ferrera 2008:88). As a result, major welfare policy decisions—i.e. spending, financing, and organisation of social protection—are still chiefly the business of national and local-level politicians. Nevertheless, European integration and European welfare states have become intertwined in complex ways. Typically, observers view integration as a constraint, or even a destructive force, affecting especially rich and generous welfare states in Western Europe (i.e. Scharpf 1999, 2002). For example, enhanced mobility of capital and labour may create a downward pressure on taxation of mobile tax bases, and thus on financing social spending. One of relatively few rigorous studies finds that this has contributed to rising inequality in Western Europe (Beckfield 2006:979). Other integration-induced constraints include fears of “social tourism” bolstered by EU enlargement (Kvist 2004). A final case in point is the growth and stability pact of the Euro area. Its emphasis on fiscal discipline may increase short-term retrenchment risks, as generous welfare states find it harder to run spending deficits in recessions.

Inevitably however, there is lack of consensus on these complex processes. Some argue that integration, all things told, is a positive for European welfare states (Moravcsik and Sangiovanni 2003; Rhodes 2003). Some note that the “open method of co-ordination”

increasingly allows cross-border goal-setting, benchmarking, and positive learning in social policy (e.g. Atkinson 2002; de la Porte and Pochet 2002; O'Connor 2005). Others see little empirical evidence neither of social tourism (Kvist 2004) nor of “social dumping,” but instead signs that EU-induced fiscal discipline generates cost containment and efficiency reforms (Rhodes 2003). Yet others argue that any negative pressures applied by integration are redundant in the face of forces like ageing populations and post-industrialization. From this vantage point, present policies and outcomes would have materialized with or without European integration (Pierson 2001; Moravcsik and Sangiovanni 2003).

Against this backdrop, I continue an emerging line of research examining how and why citizens perceive the EU-welfare nexus. Most past studies, however, concentrate on the impact of stable institutional/contextual factors such as the nature of the political economy (Brinegar et al. 2004), the size of social spending (Ray 2004), or constellations of party conflict (Kumlin 2009). However, the contested nature of the subject matter also allows for construction, framing and opinion-shaping within parameters set by the institutional framework. Research on EU support generally shows that both political parties (Hooghe and Marks 2005; Gabel and Scheve 2007; Steenbergen et al. 2007), and the mass media (Bruter 2003 ; Carey and Burton 2004; De Vreese and Boomgarden 2006; Schuck and de Vreese 2006; Maier and Rittberger 2008) can exercise considerable opinion-leadership and framing power.ⁱ

This raises questions about the effectiveness of elite information in shaping citizens’ perceptions of the EU-welfare state nexus. For sure, political actors regularly make accusations upwards and downwards in the multilevel system (see Moravcsik and Sangiovanni 2003; Lewin 2007). But there is less direct causal evidence concerning the strength and nature of such information effects when it comes to the EU-welfare nexus.ⁱⁱ Therefore, I present a survey experiment in which respondents were randomly provided with different “EU-welfare frames” in the area of health care. The dependent variables are evaluations of health care performance at the EU- and national level, respectively.

Next, I use the literature on “blame avoidance” to derive two assumptions about evaluations of credit and blame in a multi-level polity (Weaver 1986). One is the *constrained perceptions assumption*, under which performance evaluations at different political levels have implications for each other. An interesting version of this assumption is that they make “zero-sum” adjustments concerning the distribution of credit and blame across levels. Second, the *negative bias assumption* states that such adjustments are more easily triggered by negative information about blame than by positive information about “credit.”

I then discuss research on “framing” and EU support (i.e Schuck and de Vreese 2006). This literature has generally demonstrated that EU support is sensitive to whether integration is framed as “opportunity” or “risk” for the nation state. (At the same time, however, few studies examine the specifics of the EU-welfare nexus.) Importantly, European public spheres appear marked by a mix of positive and negative EU frames. Thus, concentrating exclusively on negative information and blame avoidance would be too narrow. What is more, in this policy domain government parties are more likely than the opposition to provide positive frames. This reverses the typical situation identified in blame avoidance theory, where government parties are often assumed to “scapegoat” other actors and levels. As we shall see, this reversal in turns opens the door to *unintended* framing effects. Governments may paint EU-induced conditions in too rosy colours,

which may reflect negatively on its own performance. Conversely, opposition parties may be too negative about integration; this may in turn reflect positively on the current performance of the government.

Later sections explain the experiment, its setting (The 2009 Swedish EUP election), and subject matter (the Europeanization of health care). The empirics then show that people receiving positive EU performance frames not only more become positive about the EU's impact on health care, but (2) more negative about national performance (even though no explicit information about the national level was provided). The opposite pattern is found for negative EU-welfare information. This supports the notion of zero-sum constrained perceptions. Also, they support the negative bias assumption, although positive frames also seem to matter. A final empirical section finds that these effects are moderated by left-right predispositions in ways that underscore and nuance the unintended nature of framing in the EU-welfare area.

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ⁱ On a more general note, American evidence suggests perceptions of government performance depend on subjective “accounts” presented by politicians just as much as on “objective” features of performance. Still, not all such accounts are effective and some citizens are more prone than other’s to accept them (see McGraw and Hubbard 1996; McGraw 2001).

ⁱⁱ An indirect finding of interest is that the welfare dissatisfaction effects on EU mistrust grow where euroscepticism and welfare state support coincides among parties (Kumlin 2009). Under such conditions, citizens may receive stronger elite cues suggesting a problematic integration-welfare relationship.

Blame avoidance theory: “negative bias” and “constrained perceptions”?

The concept of “blame avoidance” has gained influence in political science (Weaver 1986; Lewin 2007). It has been successfully used for a wide range of purposes, such as explaining communication strategies (Hood et al. 2009) as well actual public policy (Pierson 2001; Lindbom 2007; Zohlnhöfer 2007). While no unified theory has emerged, a couple of basic assumptions can be identified (c.f. Weaver 1986). One is that political actors generally have more to lose in electoral terms from perceived performance failure than can be won from perceived success (*the negative bias assumption*). Thus, actors spend more energy on strategies for blame avoidance than on “credit claiming.” Such strategies may shape the nature of institutional reforms, political agendas, as well as the details of policy-making. Importantly, they also include direct attempts to persuade the public that other actors, perhaps at other levels, are responsible for failure (“scapegoating”). The need for blame avoidance is generally believed to have grown over time with increasing voter mobility, media negativity, and fiscal austerity.

Negativity bias is turn driven by several causes. First, the logic of modern mass media may involve a tendency to highlight negative rather than positive content (i.e. Altheide and Snow 1979). Second, in the current era of budget austerity, any costs of welfare restructuring are assumed to be immediately visible for concentrated groups, whereas any benefits evolve slowly and concern society at large. This matters as “it is one of the few basic axioms of political science that concentrated interests will generally be advantaged over diffuse ones.” (Pierson 2001:413). A third cause concerns individual citizens and is immediately relevant here. Individuals are thought to be more focused on avoiding losses and deterioration than on reaching gains and improvements. Inspired by psychological research on “prospect

theory,” such “risk-aversiveness” is seen a general human tendency (Lau 1985; Mercer 2005; Vis and van Kersbergen 2007). The important implication would be that citizens are more attentive to negative arguments about blame for malperformance than positive arguments about credit for policy success.

A second assumption is less explicit in blame avoidance research, but equally important here. At a minimum, scapegoating depends on citizens forming meaningful perceptions of how credit and blame are distributed across political actors and levels. More than this, strategies are more effective where such perceptions not only exist in an isolated sense, but are part of a coherent belief system. In such a system, multiple perceptions of several actors are consequential for each other. One may call this the “*constrained perceptions assumption*.”

When multiple credit- and blame perceptions constrain each other a specific argument about one component of such a belief system may stimulate changes *also* in other components. Crucially, this can happen even when nothing explicit is said about them. As Converse (1964) explained in his classic work on constraint in belief systems, “In the dynamic case, ‘constraint’ or ‘interdependence’ refers to the probability that a change in the perceived status (truth, desirability, and so forth) of one idea-element would *psychologically* require, from the point of view of the actor, some compensating change(s) in the status of idea-elements elsewhere in the configuration.”

Moreover, as Converse also pointed out, there may be many types of constraining factors. I concentrate on the possibility that people conceive of credit and blame in a compensating, “zero-sum” fashion. Under this assumption, people may reason that “if the old government

apparently is to be blamed more than I thought, then the new government should be blamed less.” A closely related possibility is that citizens think in terms of externally induced conditions (“apparently the old government gave the new one a worse starting point than I thought, so the new one must have done better than I thought”). Taking an EU example, citizens who are persuaded that “the EU is more influential and worse-performing than I thought” may, in a next step, unaided by further information, conclude that national politicians are not performing so badly after all. Conversely, positive performance information on the EU would reflect negatively on the national level (“apparently the EU creates better conditions for national politicians than I thought, so their results are not so impressive after all”). In conclusion, then, zero-sum constrained thinking about credit and blame can magnify and diversify consequences of blame avoidance (and credit claiming) strategies.

Now, assuming such thought processes is tenuous, not least in a multi-level governance setting.¹ When blame avoidance and credit claiming concern only, say national government versus opposition it is probably clearer that what is good news for one actor is bad for the other. After all, these actors are regularly and explicitly pitted against each other in elections. However, zero-sum thinking about responsibility is less obvious when *levels* rather than actors are involved. In these cases, EU information may well affect only perceptions of the EU, but fail to indirectly shape views of the national level through any constraining logic. Blame avoidance and credit claiming strategies will be less influential and more demanding as the messenger must explain a more complex series of arguments, unaided by constrained thought processes among citizens themselves.

Unintended effects of framing by government and opposition?

The idea that a whole perceptual system is moved by a specific argument lies at the heart of the notion of *framing* (Iyengar 1991; Chong and Druckman 2007). Briefly, framing can be defined as choosing a particular way of portraying an attitude object. What is more, frames are seen as well-known “storylines” or “coherent constructions” that can be triggered by a simple cue (a concept, an image, a symbol). Put differently, framing means *activating* a familiar storyline with a simple signal, rather than explaining all its details afresh. Citizens are believed to “fill in the blanks” (Lau and Sears 1986) left open by the actual cue/message.

Research on EU framing has concentrated on whether integration is generally portrayed as a negative “risk” or a positive “opportunity” for one’s country (i.e. Schuck and de Vreese 2006). There is by now convincing evidence that EU support is sensitive to how integration is framed in the public sphere. (However, the conceptualisation and measurement of framing has usually not concerned the EU-welfare nexus). Another insight may seem self-evident, but is still important here: European public spheres often contain some *mix* of positive and negative EU frames. Of course, this does not necessarily mean perfect equality, although it sometimes does (cf. Schuck and Devreese 2006). At a minimum, however, the one-sided focus on negative information and scapegoating suggested by blame avoidance theory becomes too narrow. Hence, the experiment below embraces the notion that Europeanization of health care may be framed positively as well as negatively.

In blame avoidance theory, moreover, a government is inherently interested in scapegoating other actors and levels. However, in EU politics this may actually be reversed. In this policy domain, government parties—who tend to come from more integration-oriented party

families and who participate in EU-policy making—often take more integrationist positions compared to those outside the policy-making establishment (Wessels 1995; Sitter 2001; Marks et al. 2002).¹ This implies that government and opposition will often frame against their own interests. Certainly West European governments will, on balance, tend to argue that integration benefits the welfare state. Ironically, the zero-sum logic may lead citizens to perceive external conditions in more positive light, thus reflecting badly on government performance. In contrast, opposition parties—which on balance are more eurosceptic—will more often than not argue that the welfare state is hurt by integration. But this may lead citizens to perceive external conditions in a more negative light, thus reflecting positively on government performance. This realistic situation is mimicked by the experiment explained below.

The Europeanization of health care

Health care has increasingly been subject to Europeanization (see Ferrera 2005; Blomqvist and Larsson 2009). Since the end of the 1990s a series of ECJ rulings has expanded citizens' rights to "planned health care" abroad. Anchoring these decisions in single market principles of free movement, the court has ruled that citizens can receive both non-hospital and hospital health care in another EU country if they cannot receive care at home within reasonable time. The receiving country cannot discriminate foreign care-seekers, and the home country is normally required to foot the bill up to the amount provided for by its system.

¹ A reflection of the same basic structure is often found among citizens with government sympathisers being more EU-supportive than others (see Franklin et al. 1994).

The establishment of these principles has generated insecurity among citizens and policymakers alike. What does “reasonable time” mean in a concrete situation? How to get the information and encouragement needed to seek care abroad? How are reimbursement limits to be calculated? When can the home country demand “prior authorization” for reimbursement to be made? Who and how many will go where once they learn about their rights? A recently enacted “patient mobility directive” is meant to fill in some of these gaps opened by ECJ rulings (Blomqvist and Larsson 2009).²

The development has generated political conflict. Advocates of patient mobility tend to emphasize health care improvements and more efficient allocation of resources. Opponents focus on problems of steering and planning, and of inequalities that could arise as richer and multilingual individuals may be more prone to travel. However, as current volumes of care-seeking abroad are small (around 1 percent of European health care spending) these conflicts often concern speculations about future policies, behavior, and legal interpretations. This ambiguity may provide fertile breeding ground for framing attempts.

The experiment

The experiment was conducted inside a web survey fielded during the 2009 Swedish European parliamentary election campaign. Some 1500 respondents were recruited in collaboration with two major national daily newspapers. Appendix A explains the background of the web survey and shows the composition of the resulting non-random sample, comparing with the Swedish electorate. It is important to note a clear overrepresentation of politically interested voters and a moderate overrepresentation of

² Cross-border health care has also been debated in conjunction with the general “services directive,” meant to enhance mobility of service providers across borders. Eventually, health care was left out of this directive.

rightist/non-socialist individuals. Past research concludes that politically aware individuals are somewhat less sensitive to framing and persuasion than others (controlling for exposure; see Zaller 1992). Thus, the overall effects reported below are likely to be on the conservative side. However, studies also conclude that the politically aware are better at discovering whether messages are consistent with their political predispositions. Thus, the analysis of interactions between experimental conditions and predispositions below might exaggerate the importance of such interactions. As we shall see, however, the point of that section is not providing exact population estimates, but rather investigating if the tendency of interactions support zero-sum interpretations of framing effects.

To obtain realistic frames, I initially considered election manifestoes of all main parties. In a next step, I identified the two passages that provided the most condensed, coherent, and realistic expressions of the range of positions on the Europeanization of health care found in Swedish politics. Specifically, the stimuli were given in conjunction with this question: “In your view, how does the EU affect opportunities for Swedes to get good health care?” Four different randomly assigned stimuli (plus one control condition) preceded the question. The first group received an info-box saying:

BACKGROUND. The following argument was recently put forward in the public EU debate: *“the EU should not interfere with health care in member states. Proposals threatening health care financing must be reversed, as must the idea that welfare services can be traded as commodities. In its ambition to organise welfare services through markets, i.e. the patient mobility directive and the services directive, the EU undermines collective welfare policies.”*

I call this group “negative-anonymous” as views on the EU welfare nexus are negative but lack information about the messenger. In contrast, a second group (“negative-left”) received

the same box but also learned that the excerpt is taken from the Left Party's election manifesto. In contrast, a third group ("positive-anonymous") read a benevolent take on the EU-welfare nexus:

BACKGROUND. The following argument was recently put forward in the public EU debate: *"It's important that free movement across borders applies to doctors as well as patients. Patients get better health care if health care actors can work all over the union. Improved patient mobility reduces national waiting lists and allows division-of-labour between member states."*

A fourth group ("positive-right) learned that this was an excerpt from the manifesto of the Moderate party, which had held the prime minister post for almost three years. The fifth group (the control group) received no info-box and only answered the question on EU health care influence.

Overall effects

Two dependent variables are analyzed. One is the aforementioned opinion item on how the EU influences Swedish health care, with response alternatives ranging from "very negative" to "very positive" influence. The second one concerns domestic health care performance since the 2006 election (which produced a shift from social democratic minority government to a centre-right coalition). This question was asked well after the experiment and in a different form, so as to avoid signalling that the two dependent variables somehow belong logically together. This could create artificially constrained relationships. Specifically, the item featured on a survey page that first asked three general questions about the performance of the Swedish national government and opposition. Then came a question battery with the following head question: "What do you think about the political results achieved in the following areas since the 2006 election." The analysis focuses on responses to a battery item

on “health care,” with responses ranging from “very bad” to “very good” results. This item, like that on EU health care influence, was scored from 0 to 10 with higher values denoting more satisfaction.

These evaluations are first regressed on the experimental conditions (Table 1). Figure 1 is a graphical illustration of the results using predicted values with other variables at zero (dummies) or means (health care evaluations). Note that these equations control for health care evaluations at the “other” level. This specification is needed as both dependent variables concern “health care,” are positively correlated ($p=.29$), but hypothesized to bear different relationships with the experimental treatment. Omitting these controls, then, would unduly attenuate experimental differences.

[TABLE 1 AND FIGURE 1]

Unsurprisingly, the anonymous negative condition made respondents perceive the EU’s health care influence in a more negative light (-1.58). Further, there is mild support for negative bias as this negative effect is the single strongest effect. At the same time, there are still measurable effects in the positive direction of being exposed to the positive anonymous condition (.92).

Looking at the second column, negative anonymous EU-welfare information also makes perceptions of domestic performance more positive (1.04 and .50). Conversely, positive arguments about the EU’s health care influence tend to depress views about the record of Swedish political actors (-.17 and -.36). This supports the constrained perceptions

assumption. Respondents indeed appear to draw “zero-sum” conclusions from information concerning one political level for another. Reading that the EU is a destructive force in health care enhances evaluations of national-level performance, even though info-boxes contain no information about national-level actors. Conversely, receiving positive EU performance arguments reflects negatively on the record of national politics.

Again, the data are largely consistent with negative bias. Negative EU framing appear to reflect more positively on national performance compared to the negative effect of positive EU information. At the same time, positive information has significant effects also here. Put differently, the negative bias supported by these data is about individuals attaching less weight to positive information, rather than ignoring it altogether.

Finally, note that the experimental treatment explains somewhat more variance in the EU item compared to the item on Swedish results (22 versus 12 percent). This is natural as the former item was asked immediately after the info-boxes and as the information given is more most immediately relevant there. It seems that the notion of “zero-sum” should not be understood in a strict mathematical sense. EU health care frames exercise their strongest effects on EU perceptions. Under the surface, however, the respondents appear to draw conclusions also about domestic performance.

Two moderating roles played by political predispositions

Figure 1 illustrates that overall effects decrease once people learn about the messenger. Even at face value, this fits the standard political-psychological assumption that political predispositions (i.e. party identification or basic political values) work as “filters” through

which information is evaluated and interpreted (i.e. Campbell et al. 1960; Zaller 1992).

Generally, people should be more affected by messages and messengers the more these fit predispositions. Thus, the same information can have rather different effects among people with different predispositions. This section digs deeper into the nature of such moderating interactions.

To avoid endogeneity, predispositions should ideally be measured before experimental treatment. The data set gives only one option here: “Which party or parties do you consider voting for in the 2009 European parliament elections?” Respondents could simultaneously tick several parties. The information was used to create a trichotomy ranging from -1 (considers Left party) to +1 (considers Moderate party), with 0 as a neutral category containing those not considering any of these parties.² The linear construction makes sense as these parties represent the mainstream range of party positions along the left-right dimension as well as in terms of the EU-welfare nexus. The measure, then, should tap whether the individual is politically predisposed to accept and draw conclusions based on messages from these parties in this area.

Table 2 uses “EU health care influence” as dependent variable,” and lets the effect of party-labelled info-boxes interact with predispositions. Figures 2A and B display results graphically. The resulting interactions here tell a straightforward and expected story. The negative left condition exercises an even stronger impact among leftists compared to neutrals, but basically no effect among rightists. Conversely, the positive right condition matters even more among rightists compared to neutrals, but not at all among leftists. Thus,

as has been shown many times before, predispositions towards a messenger structure perceptual responses.

[TABLE 2 AND FIGURES 2A-B]

Things get more interesting and complex when “Swedish health care results” is used as dependent variable (Table 3, Figures 3A and B). This is a more complex situation as predispositions towards the messenger, and the political tendency of “zero-sum” reasoning across levels, do not coincide. For example, the negative-left condition captures a leftist party from the opposition using a frame that potentially reflects positively on the domestic centre-right government’s performance. Conversely, the positive-right condition captures a government party using a frame that reflects negatively on domestic performance.

Theoretically then, one can separate between two different roles played by predispositions. One is the predisposition-based evaluation of the messenger, the other being a more substantive evaluation of whether a performance argument on one political level has zero-sum implications for another level. Table 3 illustrates these mechanisms by letting predispositions interact with the four experimental conditions. Figures 3 A-D illustrate the results.

[TABLE 3 AND FIGURES 3A-D]

Beginning with the negative-anonymous frame, it is mainly rightists’ perceptions of domestic performance that grow more positive after this negative EU frame. There is also a smaller but significant positive slope among neutrals ($p=.009$). By contrast, leftists do not appear to

make zero-sum constrained conclusions (presumably as this would reflect positively on a government they oppose). Overall, this suggests predispositions matter, not only for evaluating the messenger, but also govern whether zero-sum conclusions are drawn. Results for the positive-right frame further support this idea. It is mainly leftists, and to a weaker extent neutrals, who react to the positive EU frame by perceiving domestic performance more negatively. In contrast, the line is flat among rightists. Consistent with expectations, they are unwilling to draw zero-sum conclusions with negative implications for the domestic performance of the government they are predisposed to support.

The positive-anonymous condition show results along similar lines, although its interaction with predispositions only approaches significance ($p=.26$). The tendency, however, is that leftists are more prone to use the positive EU frame as an argument against domestic performance. There is a weaker predicted effect among neutrals, whereas the line for rightists is flat.

The negative-left condition departs from the other three as effects are the same among rightists, leftists, and neutrals alike. Now, with three of four interactions supporting the main assumption it is tempting to disregard this as an anomaly or perhaps the result of sampling variation. However, there are also two substantive interpretations that would in fact support some of our assumptions. One would be that this strongly negative content has the power to trigger thought processes among all people regardless of political outlook.; this would support the negative bias assumption. A second interpretation is that the combination of a leftist messenger and rightist zero-sum implication (government has done better than one would have thought) offset each other here. In other words, leftists would be more prone to

react to information given by the Left party, but rightists would be more prone to react as the information buttresses the domestic government. We cannot discriminate between these interpretations here. However, we saw previously that the negative frame interacts with predispositions when information about the messenger is lacking. This makes it unlikely that the interaction fails to materialize here only because of strongly gripping negative content. Rather, it is more consistent with the notion of offsetting effects.

In conclusion, then, three of four interactions—and two of four significantly so—suggest that not only messenger, but also the nature of the zero-sum implication, interact with political predispositions in shaping reactions to framing. This is interesting in two ways. First, it allows us to speak with greater precision as to who is affected how. A second point is especially important: the fact that we find interactions with the nature of zero-sum implications support the assumption that respondents engage in such thought processes in the first place.

Conclusions

Political scientists have become increasingly interested in “blame avoidance.” Though surely an ancient phenomenon, it may well have become more important recently, as a combined result of budget austerity, voter volatility, and media negativity. Additionally, political institutions themselves have grown more complex and ambiguous, thus enhancing opportunities to escape blame. As explained by Papadopoulos (2003:437, 87): “Several studies, focusing on different policy sectors, in diverse national and local environments find broad convergence toward a policy-making style dominated by cooperation among government levels, and between public and non-public actors [...] With the proliferation of

governance structures, decisional processes become more opaque due to the overcrowding and the ‘problem of many hands’ that result from it.”

The relationship between the multilevel polity of the European Union and national welfare states is a prime example. This policy domain, comprising widely popular and politically salient programs, is affected by integration in ways that are not institutionalized and obvious, but rather indirect and disputed. It therefore provides fertile soil for active framing attempts aiming at reshaping citizens’ views of how credit and blame is distributed.

On the one hand, the experiment bears out crucial assumptions found in, or derived from what was loosely referred to as “blame avoidance theory.” Most fundamentally, respondents indeed appear affected by how the Europeanization of health care is framed. Apparently not only stable institutional aspects of welfare states shape hopes and fears attached to integration. Also information provided by political agents can matter. More than this, there is a “negative bias” in that messages about a destructive impact are more effective than upbeat suggestions that integration improves conditions. Hence, blame avoidance scholars appear right in putting a special emphasis on strategies for blame avoidance rather than credit claiming. At the same time, positive information also has measurable effects.

Equally supportive of blame avoidance assumptions are indications that perceptions of blame and credit are tied together across levels. At least these Swedish respondents appear to have developed a rudimentary cross-level cognitive system concerning credit and blame (“constrained perceptions assumption”). Specifically, the results are consistent with the idea of “zero-sum” constraint, whereby positive EU frame has negative implications for domestic

performance views, and vice versa. This is where the notion of “framing” is especially apt; it is quite hard to accommodate this finding without somehow thinking that people react to a very simple frame by “filling in blanks,” i.e. drawing wider conclusions about things not manifest in the message.

Yet other findings deviate from standard blame avoidance assumptions. Most importantly, the experiment captures an arguably realistic situation where opposition parties are especially prone to frame the EU-welfare nexus negatively. This reverses the prototypical blame avoidance situation as it is no longer the government that spread the most negative frames about a distant scapegoat. Combining this reversal with zero-sum adjustments implies framing effects may partly work against actors’ intentions. By example, we have seen that negative framing by an opposition party not only results in more negative EU perceptions (as might be the immediate intention). It also results in more positive views of domestic performance. It is hard to imagine that such a give-away to the incumbent government was intended. By the same token, positive EU frames provided by a government party not only boosts EU evaluations—as would be the immediate intention—but also reflect negatively on its own domestic performance.

The analysis of predispositions further clarified and nuanced these patterns. Importantly, not only the political tendency of the messenger matters for these interactions. Respondents also seem to consider the tendency of zero-sum implications. This becomes especially interesting when, as in this experiment, messenger and zero-sum implication do not coincide. For example, negative accusations from the leftist opposition against the EU’s health record do not only make (especially leftist) individuals perceive the EU more negatively. Under the

surface, it also further estranges neutrals and rightists by making them think more highly of domestic government performance. Conversely, celebrations of the EU's health record from the largest and most rightist government party not only makes (especially rightists) more positive about the EU. Under the surface, this frame also further estranges especially neutrals and leftists by making them perceive domestic health performance more negatively.

Outlook

European integration and European welfare states will become increasingly intertwined. An immediate example is the tightening of "fiscal federalism" in the Euro area that seem to result from frequent breaches of the "stability and growth pact," coupled with recent sovereign-debt crises of 2010.³ What can we expect in terms of attempts to shape credit and blame perceptions? One scenario is that pressured national governments will increasingly exploit Europeanization in blame avoidance strategies, scapegoating the EU level in the face of unpopular austerity measures. Whenever this happens, negative bias and constrained perceptions should work to the advantage of the government with EU perceptions becoming more negative and domestic performance perceptions more positive. Of course, this is the classic situation pinpointed by blame avoidance theory.

At the same time, I noted, government parties participate in EU policymaking and usually come from party families with at least mildly positive positions on European integration. Therefore, an equally realistic scenario is that negative framing of the EU-welfare nexus will come from opposition parties. In such cases, the results suggest, negativity bias and constrained perceptions may generate a more complex mix of intended and unintended effects. Government and opposition may be successful in persuading citizens when it comes

to negative/positive integration effects. However, the prize to be paid could often be unintended give-aways to political opponents concerning the nature of domestic performance. Thus, whenever the EU-welfare nexus is politicized it may not suffice to speak only of “blame avoidance” and “credit claiming” (c.f. Weaver 1986). As far as domestic performance is concerned, we should also consider the possibility of unintended governmental “blame-claiming,” coupled with unequally unintended “credit-giving” by the opposition.

TABLES AND FIGURES

Table 1. Experimental conditions and health care evaluations at EU- and national level (OLS estimates)

	<i>EU influence on health care</i>	<i>Swedish health care results</i>
<i>Experiment groups</i>		
<i>(reference category: control group)</i>		
Negative anonymous	-1.58***	1.04***
Negative left	-.28	.50**
Positive right	.53***	-.17
Positive anonymous	.92***	-.36*
Swedish health care results	.31***	---
EU influence on health care	---	.37***
Adjusted R-squared	.22	.12
N	1501	1501

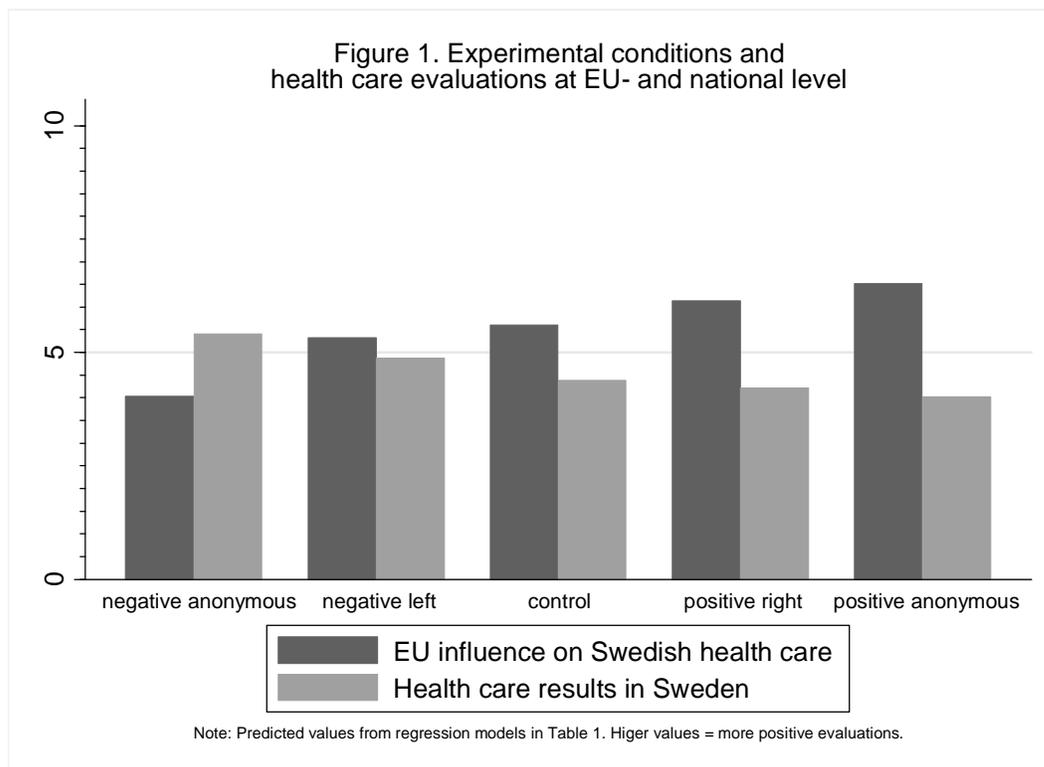
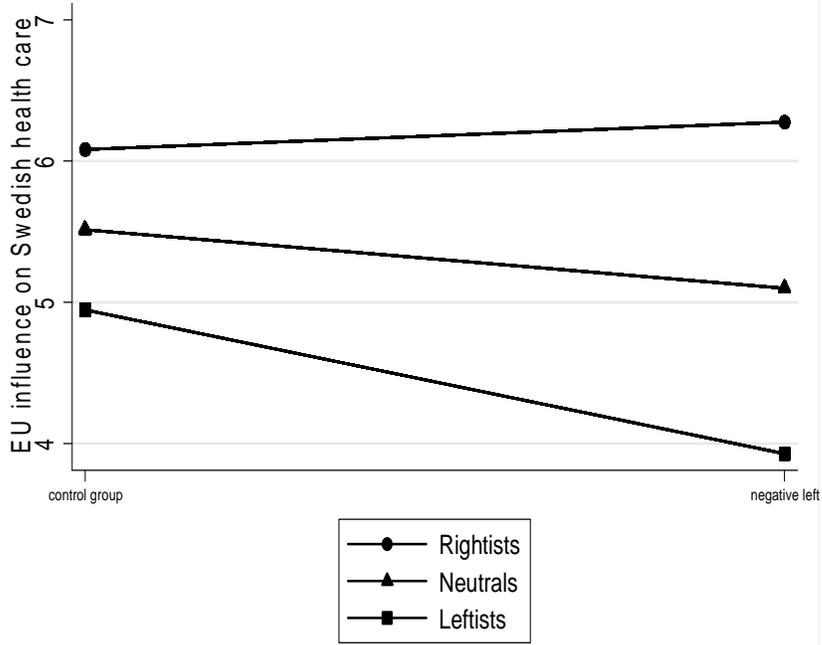


Table 2. Interactions with political predisposition (OLS estimates)

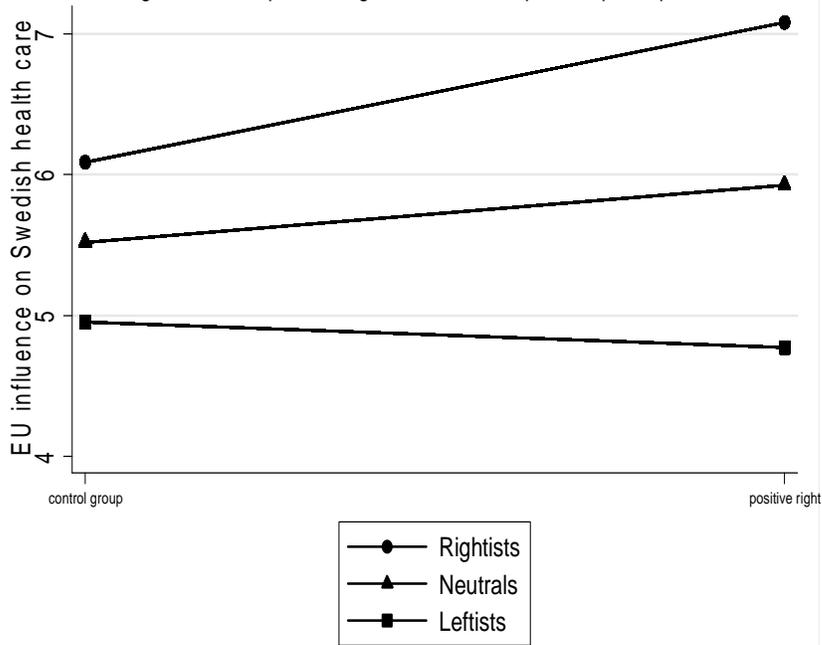
	<i>EU influence on health care</i>
<i>Experiment groups</i>	
<i>(reference category: control group)</i>	
Negative anonymous	-1.58***
Negative left	-.41**
Positive right	.41**
Positive anonymous	.91***
Swedish health care results	.21***
Left-right (-1 - +1)	.57***
<i>Experimental condition X left-right</i>	
Negative left X Left-right	.61***
Positive right X Left-right	.59***
Adjusted R-squared	.26
N	1501

Figure 2A. The negative left condition and political predispositions.



Note: Predicted values from regression model in Table 2. Higher values = more positive evaluations.

Figure 2B. The positive right condition and political predispositions.

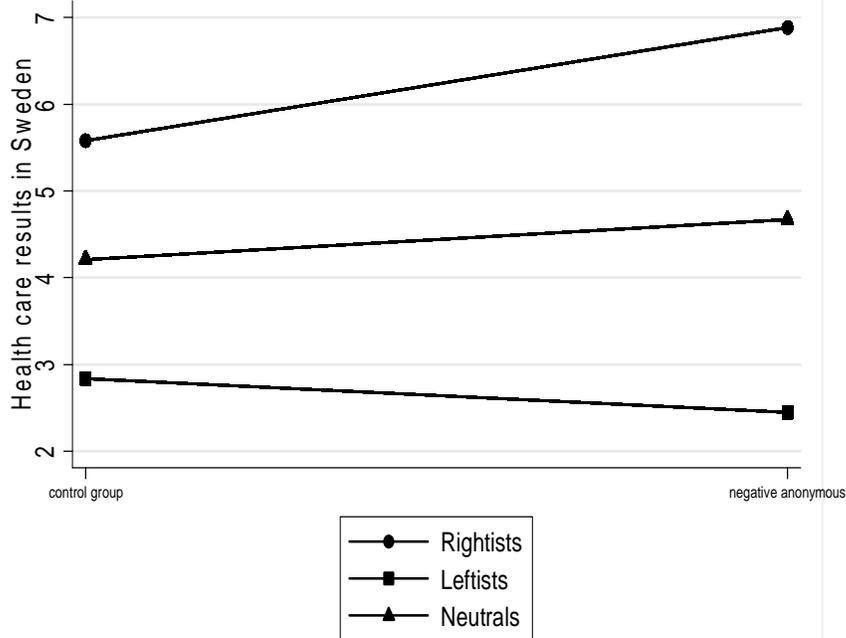


Note: Predicted values from regression model in Table 2. Higher values = more positive evaluations.

Table 3. Interactions with political predisposition (OLS estimates)

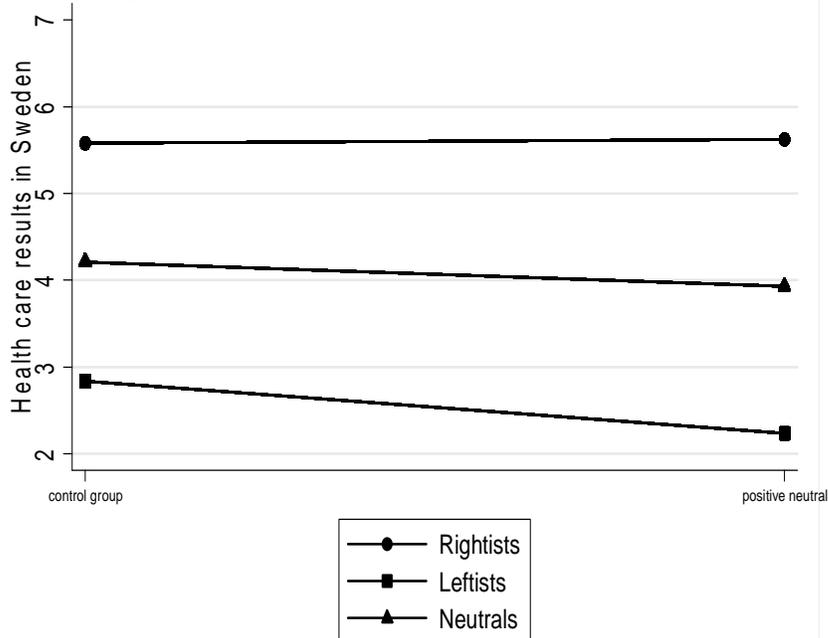
	<i>Swedish health care results</i>
<i>Experiment groups</i>	
<i>(reference category: control group)</i>	
Negative anonymous	.46***
Negative left	.36*
Positive right	-.22
Positive anonymous	-.28
EU health care influence	.21***
Left-right (-1 - 1)	1.37 ***
<i>Experimental condition X left-right</i>	
Negative anonymous X Left-right	..85***
Negative left X Left-right	.08
Positive right X Left-right	.48*
Positive anonymous X Left-right	.32
Adjusted R-squared	.31
N	1501

Figure 3A. The negative anonymous condition and political predispositions.



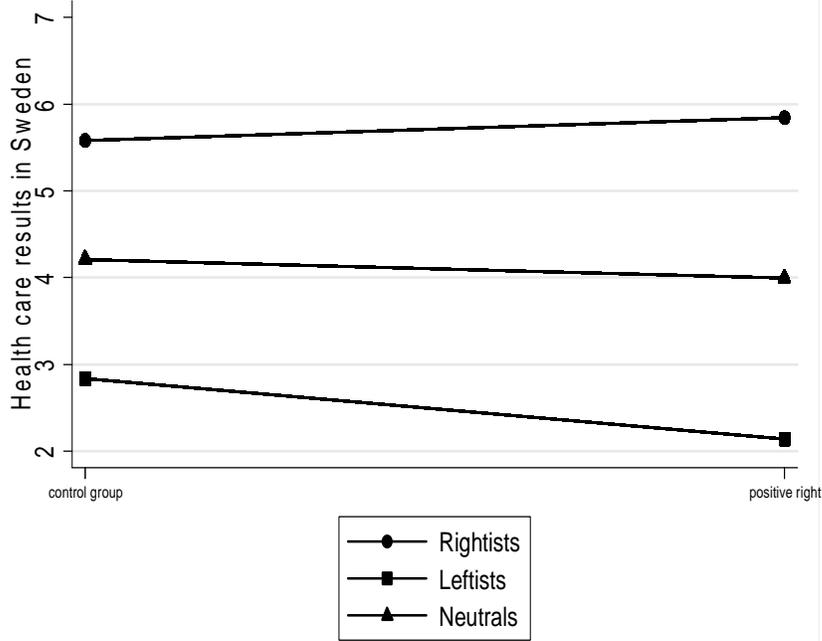
Note: Predicted values from regression model in Table 3. Higher values = more positive evaluations.

Figure 3B. The positive neutral condition and political predispositions.



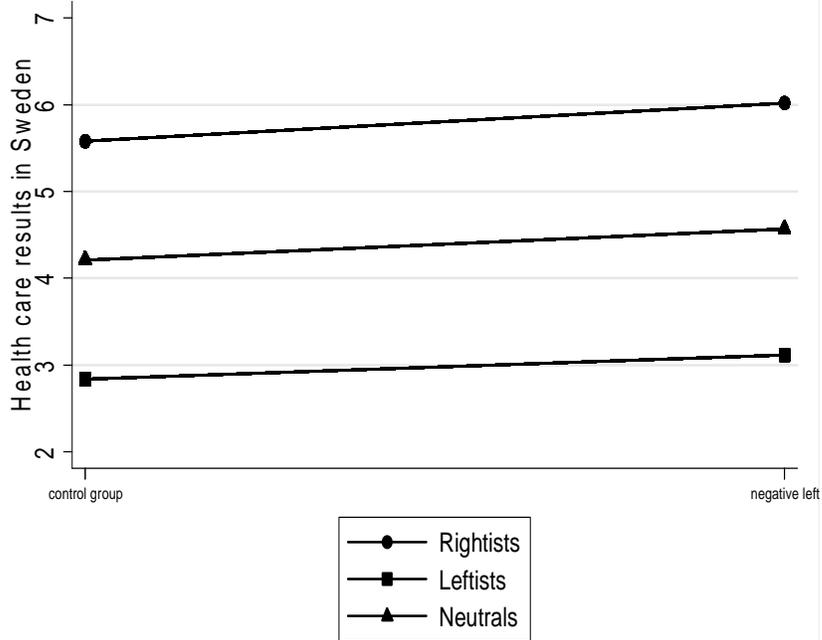
Note: Predicted values from regression model in Table 3. Higher values = more positive evaluations.

Figure 3C. The positive right condition and political predispositions.



Note: Predicted values from regression model in Table 3. Higher values = more positive evaluations.

Figure 3D. The negative left condition and political predispositions.



Note: Predicted values from regression model in Table 3. Higher values = more positive evaluations.

Appendix: The survey experiment

The 2009 Swedish Webpanel is a continuation of a series of web election surveys carried out since 2002 at the Department of Political Science, University of Gothenburg. “Texttalk Websurvey” (<https://websurvey.texttalk.se/>) provided software, server space, and technical advice (Dahlberg et al. 2006). Like past surveys in the series the 2009 sample was self-selected rather than random. Specifically, respondents were recruited via web-based party selector-tools offered by the two national dailies Expressen and Aftonbladet. Readers using these selectors were asked if they wanted to take part in a web-based impartial election survey conducted by University of Gothenburg. Those agreeing submitted their e-mail address. The experiment analyzed here was included in the first of four panel waves, fielded on May 18, 2009. The EUP election was held on June 7.

Table A1 Comparisons between webpanel respondents and the Swedish population
(percent)

	<i>Webpanel</i>	<i>Population</i>	<i>Difference</i>
Politically interested (very or rather)	84	55	29
Non-voters	8	65	57
Voted for Social Democrats	12	24	12
Voted for red-green bloc	32	40	8
Women	37	50	13

Note: The population information about political interest comes from the 2006 Swedish Election Study. Voting information comes from the Election Authority (www.val.se), and information about gender composition from Statistics Sweden (www.scb.se).

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Footnotes

¹ In fact, the validity of this assumption seems tenuous in most political settings. A good example come from American research on “negative campaigning.” Here, many scholars initially thought negative attacks against an opponent not only hurt support for that opponent, but also enhanced public evaluations of the messenger/attacker. However, a recent meta analysis of negative campaigning studies in the US suggested that “Although attacks probably do undermine evaluations of the candidates they target, they usually bring evaluations of the attackers down even more...” (Lau et al. 2007:1185)

² Only 3 respondents considered both these parties. They were place in the middle category.

³ This is of course a speculation. But it is shared by many European political leaders as well as leading newspapers (see for instance The Economist, May 15th, 2010, p. 12, or Die Zeit, May 6th 2010, p.2.