

4 | *Blame Games in Germany*

The three blame games that occurred in the UK did not produce significant consequences. First and foremost this was because institutional factors comfortably protected political incumbents from inconvenient blame. This chapter reveals that the German political system exhibits much more heated, and oftentimes more consequential, blame games.

4.1 The National Socialist Underground Investigation Controversy (NSU)

The National Socialist Underground (NSU) investigation controversy is about the inability of the German police and secret services to detect a right extremist terror cell. This terror cell, referred to as the ‘Nationalist Socialist Underground’, had committed a number of severe crimes against people with migrant backgrounds. The terror cell was only accidentally discovered in 2011. The failure to detect the NSU earlier constituted a distant-salient controversy that led to a blame game for the second Merkel government.

Policy Struggle

Between 2000 and 2007, a murder series claimed ten victims (nine men with migrant backgrounds and one police officer) in Germany. The perpetrators of these murders remained undiscovered until 2011, when police forces accidentally detected the NSU. There are two major reasons why the NSU remained undetected for so long. First, police and secret service investigations across the country were not consolidated at the federal level. Investigations remained at the state level, where police investigations in Germany are usually carried out. Stronger information exchange between state-level authorities almost certainly would have led to the earlier detection of the NSU (Seibel,

2014). Second, initial investigations were based on the flawed suspicion that the crimes were milieu-specific, that is, investigation bodies presumed that the perpetrators had an organized crime or drug background. This presumption led the investigations down the wrong path and thereby to blatant errors.

According to German law, the minister of the interior has the ability to consolidate state-level investigations at the Bundeskriminalamt (Federal Criminal Police Office) if doing so may increase the chances of a successful manhunt. As revealed later, there were two key episodes during which a consolidation of the investigations at the Bundeskriminalamt would have been possible but had not been mandated by the minister of the interior (Seibel, 2014). In 2004, state-level police forces asked for a consolidation of the investigations at the federal level, but the Bundeskriminalamt had opposed this request. Two years later, the Ministry of the Interior, then headed by the CDU (Christian Democratic Union) politician Wolfgang Schäuble, ignored renewed attempts to consolidate investigations.

The accidental discovery of the NSU in 2011 led to strong public outcry, especially due to Germany's national socialist past. The media covered the controversy very intensively. Until the accidental discovery of the NSU, most media outlets had uncritically adopted the investigation narrative put forward by the police. Several German newspapers had referred to the murder series as 'kebab murders'.¹ Moreover, there was bewilderment at the fact that the many state- and federal-level police and secret service forces involved in the case had not communicated with each other better and had not exchanged information relating to the murders.

Blame Game Interactions

In November 2011, shortly after the discovery of the NSU, the German parliament discussed the controversy and commemorated the victims. The coalition government of the CDU and the FDP (Free Democratic Party), headed by chancellor Angela Merkel, apologized to the relatives of the victims. Politicians from all parties acknowledged the seriousness of the investigation failure and expressed their intention to inquire into what had gone wrong.² The government and the SPD (Social Democratic Party) initially wanted these inquiries to primarily take place in the respective states where the crimes had occurred. However, the Green

Party and the Left Party called for a federal inquiry that would also look at the role of the federal authorities in the flawed investigations.³ The government quickly gave in to this request and, together with the opposition, endorsed the appointment of a federal inquiry commission. The government expressed its willingness to thoroughly investigate the issue and learn from the mistakes committed. Chancellor Merkel assured the public that the government would “do everything to clear things up.”⁴

The inquiry commission began its investigation in January 2012, and, at the end of the year, it began to focus on the missed opportunities for consolidating the investigations at the federal level. When the former minister for the interior, and current finance minister, Schäuble, appeared before the inquiry commission, he rejected political responsibility for the controversy and claimed that he had not been confronted with a request to consolidate the investigations. In his view, the latter would not have proven successful anyway. Schäuble claimed that he had only “marginally been concerned” with the investigation and that he had never considered himself “to be the chief police officer of the country.”⁵ While his confidence before the inquiry commission attracted slight criticism from opposition parties and the media,⁶ a public debate about the political responsibility for the controversy did not gain momentum. Instead, opponents continued to focus their criticism on administrative entities and kept pressuring incumbents to thoroughly investigate the controversy.⁷ In response to these calls, the government repeatedly signaled its support for the inquiry and blamed administrative entities every time the inquiry discovered a new investigation slip-up. For example, Chancellor Merkel criticized that “the investigation, in many ways, does not progress how we [as politicians] want it to progress. Appropriate action needs to be taken.”⁸

In August 2013, the inquiry commission published its final report. The report predominantly focused on investigation mistakes and formulated dozens of concrete suggestions on how to reform the investigative apparatus in the areas of police, justice, and secret services.⁹ The question of political responsibility was only a minor issue in the report. Only the Green Party, in a separate statement, expressed its indignation that not a single politician had faced personal consequences for the controversy: “In a democracy, elected superiors carry political responsibility for the actions of administrative entities. It is thus a bad sign, and not just a consequence of the events, that not one responsible politician resigned in response to the many mistakes and omissions.”¹⁰ While the

controversy remained prominently in the media due to the court trial against the NSU that had begun in May 2013 (and which would last until July 2018), the question of political responsibility did not become an issue of debate again.

Consequences of the Blame Game

The blame game on the NSU controversy led to several resignations of presidents of federal or national intelligence services. Moreover, there were considerable reforms to improve the information exchange between state- and federal-level authorities. An anti-terror database was set-up and cooperation between the secret services of the states and those of the Federal Republic became institutionalized within a center against right-wing terrorism.¹¹ Moreover, the Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz (Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution), which had played an inglorious role during the investigations, was reorganized. While these reforms did not go as far as the Green Party and the Left Party wanted them to, they are nevertheless extensive and a direct result of the heavy pressure that all parties put on the administrative level during the blame game.

Context-Sensitive Analysis of Blame Game Interactions

But why was the blame game so strongly oriented toward the administrative level from start to end? Why did the question of political responsibility for the investigation mistakes never come close to triggering heated attacks toward political incumbents? As a look at the sparse blame game interactions suggests, political incumbents could largely avoid an inconvenient discussion about their omissions; omissions that had contributed to a fatal investigation failure. It is likely true that the severity of the controversy prompted opponents to adopt a particularly problem-oriented approach instead of exploiting the controversy for political purposes. As the following analysis seeks to demonstrate, however, opponents did not have the chance to shift the focus of the blame game to the political level, even if they had wanted to. Strong public feedback, directed at the administrative level, incoherent attacks from opponents, and low direct government involvement in the policy area made it almost impossible for opponents to get a hold of political incumbents.

Issue Characteristics

As the biggest right-wing terrorist attack in the history of the Federal Republic, the NSU controversy revealed an unprecedented investigation failure in Germany. In the light of Germany's past, the controversy violated core values held by many Germans, namely that of a welcoming culture and tolerance toward migrants and persons with migrant backgrounds. At the same time, the larger public never directly felt the consequences of the controversy. The right-wing terrorism by the NSU was targeted at a rather small, clearly defined part of the population. Moreover, at the start of the blame game, the members of the terror cell were already dead or had been arrested and, therefore, no longer posed any danger to the public. Media coverage suggests that there was strong and emotionally charged public feedback to this distant-salient controversy. All media outlets covered this unprecedented investigation failure in an intensive and scandalizing way. Quality outlets gave very detailed accounts of the many investigation slip-ups and placed the controversy in the larger problem-context of racism and antisemitism in Germany, while also reporting in a scandalizing way.¹² While one could expect that intensive and scandalizing coverage would constitute a problem for political incumbents, it is important to note that the coverage was overwhelmingly directed at the administrative level. Although the media duly reported about Minister Schäuble's appearance in front of the inquiry commission and subsequently criticized his confident stance as inopportune, it never intensively debated the question of political responsibility, primarily due to the low direct involvement of the government in the policy area (see later).

Opponents thus focused their criticism at political incumbents' handling of the controversy. They repeatedly claimed that incumbents had a moral responsibility to commit themselves to adamantly investigating the controversy and occasionally criticized incumbents for not living up to this responsibility. For instance, opponents criticized the fact that incumbents only acted as if they were interested in investigating the issue by founding ever new and obscure commissions.¹³ Moreover, some opponents also used the salience of the issue to block overt blame deflection onto the administrative level, arguing that the respect for victims and their families demanded the assumption of political responsibility.¹⁴ Incumbents, on the other hand, immediately realized the dramatic scale of the controversy and apologized to

the victims. However, the public's focus on the administrative level created significant space for incumbents to maneuver since they only had to justify their handling of the controversy and not the omissions that had contributed to the investigation failure. They were anxious to ensure their engagement with the controversy by stressing their determination to thoroughly investigate the controversy and by repeatedly signaling that they would keep an eye on investigation authorities.¹⁵

Institutional Factors

The most important institutional factor that explains the low pressure on incumbent politicians during this blame game is low direct government involvement. In Germany, domestic security is a policy area that traditionally enjoys high bureaucratic autonomy.¹⁶ When the many investigation slip-ups were gradually discovered, it was clear to everyone that the investigation authorities had failed and opponents accordingly directed most of their blame down onto the administrative level. As already described, this created a comfortable situation for political incumbents. They did not have to justify the omissions that had contributed to the investigation failure, but they only had to signal their will and determination for thoroughly investigating the mistakes made by the investigation authorities. The minister of the interior could easily shrug off criticism pertaining to his personal responsibility and claim that he was not the “chief police officer of the country”¹⁷ – a statement that would have hardly been possible in the case of stronger government involvement, especially against the backdrop of a delicate controversy. Moreover, low government involvement allowed political incumbents to downplay the importance of their actions and decisions for the overall controversy. The minister of the interior, for example, argued that consolidating investigations at the national level would not have proven successful. In his line of argument, the more proximate mistakes by police and secret service forces had caused the investigation failure.

Another factor that benefited incumbents was the incoherent focus of opponents during the blame game. The Green Party was alone in emphasizing the issue of political responsibility. The SPD in particular kept quiet on this point. Many of the crimes had happened during a time when the SPD had still been in government and had been heading the Ministry of the Interior. Blaming Schäuble while sparing its own former minister of the interior from blame would not have looked

credible. Moreover, while the Green Party and the Left Party called for more far-reaching policy change, the SPD was largely on board with the suggestions made in the inquiry report. The government could thus safely support the report's suggestions and express its will to implement them while ignoring more far-reaching proposals from the Green Party and the Left Party.

Low pressure on incumbent politicians due to low government involvement and incoherence among opponents also explains why the stance of the governing majority and conventions of resignation were not causally relevant during this blame game. Since the government was not fiercely attacked, the governing majority could mostly keep out of the blame game. Moreover, opponents never requested Schäuble's resignation from his new post due to the NSU controversy (see Table 5 for a schematic assessment of the theoretical expectations).

4.2 The Berlin Airport Construction Controversy (BER)

The Berlin Airport construction controversy describes the repeatedly delayed opening of the Berlin Brandenburg Airport (BER) in Germany.¹⁸ Delays and cost overruns triggered a blame game in the city state of Berlin. Recurrent blame attacks by opponents brought Berlin's popular mayor, the SPD politician Klaus Wowereit, to resign due to the proximate-nonsalient controversy.

Policy Struggle

Following German reunification in 1990, political discussions began regarding the creation of a modern hub airport in the former Eastern German territory around Berlin. The new airport was intended to replace the three small existing airports of Tempelhof, Tegel, and Schönefeld. The city state of Berlin, together with the State of Brandenburg and the federal government, decided to build the new hub at the site of the former Schönefeld airport close to the city. After a failed attempt in 1999 to tender the project concession to a private contractor, the three shareholders decided to build the airport under the aegis of a public holding. Under this implementation structure, the shareholders assumed significant entrepreneurial risk because the tendering and the coordination between different construction projects and processes had to be managed by the public holding.

Table 5 *Assessment of theoretical expectations in the NSU case*

Opponents	Explanatory factor(s)	Expectation	Assessment
Opponents	Political interaction structure (fragmented/consolidated opposition)	E1: Fragmented opponents, consisting of more than one party, are less successful in crafting a cohesive blame-generating strategy during the blame game than consolidated opponents.	Confirmed. Opponents follow different goals and do not craft a cohesive blame-generating strategy.
Institutionalized accountability structures (conventions of resignation)	Institutionalized accountability structures (conventions of resignation)	E3: Opponents facing extensive conventions of resignation concentrate their blaming more on the incumbent politician than opponents facing restrictive conventions, who can only blame administrative actors.	Not relevant. Due to low direct government involvement and incoherent attacks from opponents.
Institutional policy characteristics (direct government involvement)	Institutional policy characteristics (direct government involvement)	E5: Opponents are better able to blame a controversy on incumbents if the latter are directly involved than when the controversy is far removed from incumbents.	Confirmed. Opponents are not able to relate the controversy to political incumbents.
Distant-salient controversy	Distant-salient controversy	E7: Opponents strongly invest in blame generation on the occasion of a distant-salient controversy and attempt to damage incumbents on moral grounds.	Partly confirmed. Some invest more in blame generation, others less so. However, all opponents attempt to damage incumbents on moral grounds.

Incumbents	Political interaction structure (loyal/critical governing majority)	E2: Incumbents that receive support from their party(ies) are more successful in reframing a controversy than incumbents that confront criticism from their own ranks.	Not relevant. Attacks on political incumbents are negligible.
	Institutionalized accountability structures (conventions of resignation)	E4: Incumbent politicians that must comply with extensive conventions of resignation have greater difficulty defending themselves during a blame game than politicians that must comply with restricted conventions.	Not relevant. Attacks on political incumbents are negligible.
	Institutional policy characteristics (direct government involvement)	E6: Incumbents are better able to deflect blame for a controversy onto administrative actors if they are not directly involved in the controversy rather than if they are involved.	Confirmed. Low direct involvement allows incumbents to deflect blame onto administrative actors.
	Distant-salient controversy	E8: Incumbents take a distant-salient controversy very seriously and confront it by engaging in blame deflection and symbolic activism.	Confirmed. Incumbents take the controversy very seriously and address it by engaging in blame deflection and symbolic activism.

Political involvement did not do the BER much good. Severe planning mistakes, mismanagement, and occasional intrusion from political actors that necessitated planning adaptations and thereby complicated the construction of the airport, led to significant delays and cost overruns.¹⁹ When construction began in September 2006, estimated costs were quoted at €2.1 billion, with the airport scheduled to open in October 2011. At the time of writing (November 2019), the opening date is scheduled for October 2020, at the earliest, and costs are expected to exceed €7 billion by completion. Klaus Wowereit, the popular mayor of the city state of Berlin, became the main political incumbent held responsible for the delayed and over expensive airport. The mayor had been the visible driving force and political ambassador of the project and was also the chairman of the public holding. His prominent position, and the widespread belief that the BER would be 'Berlin's airport', made the mayor and his city government the entities that would be held politically responsible and would take center stage in the ensuing blame game.

Blame Game Interactions

The first round of blame game interactions started in June 2010, when the mayor announced that the opening of the airport would be postponed from October 2011 to June 2012. The main opposition parties at this point of the blame game, the CDU and the Green Party, accused the government of being responsible for the delay.²⁰ The mayor justified the first delay by citing the unanticipated bankruptcy of a construction planning company and the stricter safety requirements mandated by the European Union, which had to be incorporated into the construction process.²¹ His party, the SPD, stressed that planning mistakes had already been made under the previous government, and it summoned all parties to support the project instead of obstructing it. In the September 2011 elections of the Berliner Abgeordnetenhaus (Berlin House of Representatives), the SPD confirmed its position as the strongest party and formed a coalition government with the CDU. The main opposition parties became the Green Party, the Left Party, and the Pirate Party.

In May 2012, the mayor announced the second postponement of the opening date, from June 2012 to March 2013. The opposition subsequently criticized him for not properly informing the public about the

true situation of the airport, expressed doubts about his claim that he had been surprised by the announcement of delay, and asked for personal consequences for the mismanagement of the public holding. In response to these allegations, the mayor apologized before parliament and assured it that he had believed in the opening date: "I ask you, with all due respect and despite all the justified criticism, to not consider us naïve and to believe us that we were totally committed to this [June 2012] date."²² He announced the demotion of the technical manager of the public holding and the replacement of one of the several planning companies involved in the construction of the airport. Despite the delays, he continued to refer to the BER as a clear success story. He claimed that the extra costs would be more than offset by the positive economic development effects of the airport and "that this magnificent airport project should not be discredited."²³ The SPD accordingly attacked opposition parties for obstructing the project and called for political reason and collaboration in the face of such an important infrastructure project.

Only four month later, in September 2012, the mayor announced another delay, this time from March to October 2013. At the root of the delays during this time was an overly complex fire protection system that was rejected by German authorities. The public holding had hoped that the system would be approved by making minor adjustments to it, but it ultimately had to admit that the system needed a major overhaul. In a government statement, the mayor blamed the management of the holding for the problems at the root of the delays and criticized the opposition for its unconstructive stance toward the airport.²⁴ However, he continued to make morale-boosting slogans and to frame the airport as a success: "Today, four month later, we can say that the additional time was necessary to put things on the right track. All those involved have their eyes firmly set on the goal to complete the most important infrastructure project of the region. This is our goal, and in order to achieve it, we must all now pool our strengths."²⁵ The government's announcement triggered heated criticism from opponents, who requested that an inquiry commission be established to systematically assess the reasons and responsibility for the delays. The Green Party also asked for the demotion of the management and the board of the public holding.²⁶

In January 2013, a fourth postponement of the opening date triggered another heated round of blame game interactions. For opposition

parties, the renewed delay of the opening date represented a clear motive for Wowereit to resign as mayor. However, their vote of no confidence against the mayor did not reach a majority. Amid criticism, the coalition government deflected blame onto the companies building the airport and attacked the opposition for its “great feat of personalizing a construction problem in a unique way.”²⁷ In addition, the CEO of the holding was forced to resign. During 2013, it became increasingly clear that the airport could not open before 2016 since the problems with the fire protection system could not be fixed. Wowereit thus publicly announced that he would resign as both chairman of the holding and as mayor by the end of 2013.

Consequences of the Blame Game

Several public managers of the holding were forced to resign during the blame game. The mayor of Berlin also stepped down. While this was a voluntary decision, it is unlikely that he could have remained in office for much longer. Opponents did not grow tired of calling for his resignation and his popularity suffered significantly during the blame game. The idiosyncratic nature of the policy problem made it difficult for incumbents to do more to address the problem. When the blame game started, it was already too late for incumbents to adapt or terminate the project. Therefore, all the government could do was hope that the difficulties caused by the fire protection system could somehow be solved.

Context-Sensitive Analysis of Blame Game Interactions

In the blame game about the BER controversy, a very popular political incumbent initially weathered blame in a confident and successful way and easily secured his reelection. However, constant attacks by opponents gradually forced him onto the defensive and ultimately made him resign. At first sight, a controversy that could not be cleared up for good and remained on the political agenda for so long sealed the mayor's fate. However, the context-sensitive analysis of blame game interactions reveals that this outcome was far from certain since the mayor enjoyed several advantages during the blame game. The Wowereit government benefited from low public feedback, dispersed attacks from opponents, and a loyal governing majority. In the end, direct

government involvement in the construction of the airport and extensive opportunities to hold the mayor personally responsible provided opponents with recurring opportunities to attack and thereby gradually diminished his chances of surviving the controversy around the BER.

Issue Characteristics

Media coverage and polls suggest that there was moderate public feedback to the BER controversy. Both quality outlets and tabloids reported on the controversy in a rather dispassionate, problem-centered way. Quality outlets attempted to reconstruct the problems at the root of the delays and discussed eventual consequences for the passengers and companies who would depend on the airport.²⁸ Only later, when the airport's opening receded into the dim future, did the coverage in quality outlets and tabloids get more person-centered and cynical. The media referred to the airport as a 'living grievance' and 'perennial satire' for which Wowerit should finally assume political responsibility. The mayor was dubbed an educated babblers (*Schwurbelmeister*) who prevaricated whenever necessary.²⁹ The strong focus on the mayor also manifested itself in his approval ratings. During later rounds of the blame game, his approval ratings suffered considerably. However, there was never a majority that wanted him to resign as mayor.³⁰

Opponents primarily attempted to generate public feedback to the controversy by making claims of personal relevance. The cost overruns accruing to the city of Berlin should have appeared quite enormous to ordinary citizens, especially to those living in a notoriously cash-strapped state like Berlin.³¹ Berliners have ample experience with malfunctioning public services and should have feared higher taxes as well as infrastructure investment stops in response to rising expenses for the airport (Bach & Wegrich, 2016). Moreover, the controversy about the BER affected a significant share of the public as passengers: 17 percent of the population of Berlin flies frequently and must endure – until the BER opens – chaotic conditions at the overcrowded old airports of the city.³² During the blame game, opponents emphasized the costs accruing to taxpayers and stressed the massive impact of the controversy on Berlin's budget. Moreover, they stressed that the cost overruns could have been used for other public investments such as the renovation of Berlin's run-down schools.³³ In the eyes of opponents, incumbents had

not only wasted scarce public money, but they had also brought humiliation to the city of Berlin and its citizens.³⁴

What limited public feedback to these blame-generation attempts, however, was the low salience of the BER controversy. Despite occasional protests by local residents relating to fly-over noise, the airport enjoyed broad public support. The public should also not have been too surprised by an over-expensive and delayed public infrastructure project. The latter had become commonplace in Germany in recent years, as a look at Stuttgart's central station, Hamburg's Elbphilharmonie, or Berlin's State Opera suggests. The media duly noted that there was no outcry (*Aufschrei*) on the part of Berliners because they were simply used to their city government's terrible infrastructure record.³⁵ The mayor clearly benefited from moderate public feedback. Given his high personal involvement, he indicated that he would take the controversy very seriously. However, he also exhibited a very confident stance throughout the blame game. In his attempts to keep up the impression that the airport would develop into a success story that would offset delays and cost overruns, the mayor and his party repeatedly emphasized the many positive effects of the airport for all Berliners. He maintained that Berliners should be patient and stand together and then everyone would benefit. Hence, we see clear attempts from both opponents and incumbents to gain dominance on the public's interpretation of what this controversy meant for it as a whole.

Institutional Factors

In addition to moderate public feedback, the Wowereit government also benefited from incoherent attacks from opponents. With the exception of the first round of the blame game, the government confronted three opposition parties that focused on different aspects of the controversy. While the Left Party and the Pirate Party focused on technical aspects, the Green Party focused more on assigning political responsibility.³⁶ The focus on technical aspects allowed political incumbents to expatiate on the problems at the airport in lengthy statements and to choose which aspects to concentrate on in their responses.³⁷ Unlike in the NSU case, where attacks on political incumbents were negligible, in the BER case, the mayor benefited from a loyal and active governing majority that attempted to undermine the credibility of opponents' blame-generation attempts. Throughout the blame game, the governing majority served as an attack device for the mayor. Especially during the earlier rounds of the

blame game, the mayor continued to act in a statesman-like way and had not yet deflected blame onto the management of the holding or accused opponents of obstructionism, despite the governing majority already having done so. This allowed the mayor, at least for a time, to remain in the background of the blame game. How strongly governing parties adhered to their supporting role is particularly visible in the behavior of the CDU. The CDU had been part of the opposition during the first round of the blame game and had been the Wowerit government's loudest critic and the first party to attack him personally. After the elections, when it formed a coalition government with the mayor's SPD, the CDU became a strong supporter of the airport and indirectly defended the mayor in parliament by deflecting blame onto the management level.

Several institutional factors were disadvantageous to the government. The most important of these factors was the direct involvement of the government in the construction of the airport. Despite a complex implementation structure with two states, the federal government, and different companies, the mayor was clearly perceived to be responsible for the fate of the airport due to his role as the chair of the supervisory board of the public holding. Strong direct government involvement allowed opponents to clearly direct their blame-generation attempts at the mayor. Extensive conventions of resignation allowed opponents to step up their attacks by plausibly calling into play the resignation of the mayor over the controversy when a timely opening of the airport had become increasingly unlikely. The latter could not reject such claims as utter nonsense, rather he could only express his determination to 'stay on board' and strive toward a timely opening of the airport.

The case further reveals that opponents benefited from their ability to appoint an inquiry commission. In the German political system, a minority in parliament can appoint an inquiry commission to investigate a controversy. In the BER case, opponents used the inquiry commission to obtain information on the mayor's personal responsibility for the controversy. Specifically, opponents wanted to know whether the mayor had violated his oversight duties as the chair of the supervisory board and whether he had communicated delays early enough and to the best of his knowledge. Hence, in the German system, opponents can use inquiry commissions to dig up information that allows them to formulate credible allegations of personal wrongdoings. However, we also see that the appointment of an inquiry commission

channels the blame game into a more technical arena in which opponents' blame generation risks becoming hypocritical. An ongoing inquiry allows incumbents to avoid blame game interactions in other venues, such as in the media or during parliamentary debate. After the inquiry commission had started its work and the Green Party kept attacking the mayor during debates in parliament, the SPD duly pointed to the commission's work and urged the Green Party not to anticipate its results.³⁸ Taken together, strong direct government involvement and extensive conventions of resignation allowed opponents to keep the mayor under constant fire and force him to resign despite only moderate public feedback, dispersed attacks from opponents, and support from the governing majority (see Table 6 for a schematic assessment of the theoretical expectations).

4.3 The Drone Procurement Controversy (DRONE)

The distant-nonsalient drone procurement controversy (DRONE) is about the failed procurement of reconnaissance drones by the German armed forces, which developed into a blame game for the defense minister of the second Merkel government, the CDU politician, Thomas de Maizière.

Policy Struggle

In the 2000s, the Bundeswehr (German armed forces) was in the middle of a large-scale structural reform: transitioning from a volunteer to a professional army and suspending universal conscription. A major problem to be addressed by the reform was the flawed military procurement system. Many military procurements did not perform as expected, arrived too late, or became too expensive. In 2010, an expert commission recommended the installation of an independent controlling system and a centralized procurement agency.³⁹ While the Defense Ministry subsequently implemented some institutional reorganizations, the reforms that were implemented fell significantly short of the original recommendations.⁴⁰

In 2013, the failed procurement of unmanned aircraft vehicles, commonly known as drones, exposed several of the problems with the procurement system that had been left unaddressed since 2010. Years earlier, the German government had decided to procure reconnaissance

Table 6 *Assessment of theoretical expectations in the BER case*

Explanatory factor(s)	Expectation	Assessment
Opponents Political interaction structure (fragmented/consolidated opposition)	E1: Fragmented opponents, consisting of more than one party, are less successful in crafting a cohesive blame-generating strategy during the blame game than consolidated opponents.	Confirmed. Opponents follow different goals and do not craft a cohesive blame-generating strategy.
Institutionalized accountability structures (conventions of resignation)	E3: Opponents facing extensive conventions of resignation concentrate their blaming more on the incumbent politician than opponents facing restrictive conventions, who can only blame administrative actors.	Confirmed. Extensive conventions of resignation allow opponents to plausibly call into play the resignation of the political incumbent.
Institutional policy characteristics (direct government involvement)	E5: Opponents are better able to blame a controversy on incumbents if the latter are directly involved than when the controversy is far removed from incumbents.	Confirmed. Strong direct government involvement allows opponents to credibly assign responsibility to the political incumbent right from the start of the blame game.
Proximate-nonsalient controversy	E9: Opponents invest considerably in blame generation on the occasion of a proximate-nonsalient controversy	Confirmed. Opponents invest considerably in blame generation and try to activate considerations of self-interest.

Table 6 (*cont.*)

Explanatory factor(s)	Expectation	Assessment
Incumbents Political interaction structure (loyal/critical governing majority)	and try to activate considerations of self-interest among the public. E2: Incumbents that receive support from their party(ies) are more successful in reframing a controversy than incumbents that confront criticism from their own ranks.	Confirmed. Strong support from the governing majority helps the political incumbent to reframe the controversy.
Institutionalized accountability structures (conventions of resignation)	E4: Incumbent politicians that must comply with extensive conventions of resignation have greater difficulty defending themselves during a blame game than politicians that must comply with restricted conventions.	Confirmed. Extensive conventions prevent the political incumbent from brusquely rejecting calls for his resignation.
Institutional policy characteristics (direct government involvement)	E6: Incumbents are better able to deflect blame for a controversy onto administrative actors if they are not directly involved in the controversy rather than if they are involved.	Confirmed. Strong direct involvement renders blame deflection attempts onto management incredible.
Proximate-nonsalient controversy	E10: Incumbents take a proximate-nonsalient controversy seriously and address it by mainly adopting reframing strategies and forms of activism.	Partly confirmed. Political incumbents take the controversy seriously and address it by adopting reframing strategies. Activism is very limited. Moreover, incumbents use blame-deflection strategies.

drones from the European EADS (European Aeronautic Defence and Space Company) and the US-based company Northrop Grumman. The latter was commissioned to develop and manufacture the drones while EADS was supposed to develop the sensor technology. From March 2013 on, rumors emerged that the Bundeswehr had problems obtaining flight permission for the drones. In fact, the European Aviation Safety Agency denied flight permission to the prototype that Northrop Grumman had delivered because it had no automated collision avoidance system. It was later revealed that the actors in charge had completely underestimated the problem of obtaining a flight permission.⁴¹

Since the Bundeswehr expected prohibitively high additional costs of up to €800 million to obtain a belated flight permission, the German minister of defense and member of the ruling CDU under Angela Merkel, Thomas de Maizière, canceled the project in early May 2013. At this time, the more than €500 million already invested seemed largely unrecoverable. Immediately following the project's cancellation, the minister failed to inform the parliament about the decision. When the latter found out about the cancellation, the DRONE controversy became an inconvenient blame game for the Merkel government preceding the 2013 German federal elections.

Blame Game Interactions

The attack on the minister by the opposition parties (the SPD, the Green Party, and the Left Party) was due less to the failure of the procurement project, which had already been initiated before the minister's time in office, and more because they took umbrage at the minister's reluctance to properly inform the parliament and the Bundesrechnungshof (Federal Audit Office) about the cancellation. They criticized the minister's information policy, asked for clarifications, and urged Chancellor Merkel to prioritize the controversy. In a public statement, the minister promised that he would provide the Bundesrechnungshof with full access to relevant documents. He framed the cancellation as the right step to avert further damage and announced that he would provide a detailed account of the issue only after all internal processes had been reviewed. Overall, however, he still exhibited a confident stance: "If we were to pull the plug on complicated procurement projects after the slightest problem, then we would

have no armaments projects at all. There is not a single procurement procedure of this magnitude without problems.”⁴²

Shortly after the first round of the blame game, a second bone of contention led to intensified interactions. The German weekly, *Der Spiegel*, uncovered information that the Defense Ministry must have already possessed detailed knowledge about the problems getting flight permission in February and that the Bundeswehr had tried to camouflage the issue.⁴³ Following this publication, opposition parties began to personally attack the minister. The SPD and the Green Party accused him of lying to the public and to parliament and saw therein a clear reason for him to resign. An SPD politician clearly urged him to assume personal responsibility: “You can’t put this responsibility on anyone else’s shoulders if you still have a spark of respect for your task.”⁴⁴ The minister responded to these allegations by downplaying his decision, which had led to the overall controversy, and reminded the opposition that the project had been initiated by a coalition government of the SPD and the Green Party. Moreover, he promised an overhaul of the procurement system and deflected responsibility for the late cancellation onto his undersecretaries, claiming that the latter had not properly informed him and that he was furious at them: “It really pisses me off. Anyone who knows me knows that this is a cautious formulation.”⁴⁵ The governing majority, consisting of the CDU and the FDP, supported the minister by stressing the SPD’s and the Green Party’s involvement in the launch of the project. In the parliamentary debate, the governing majority accused the opposition of scandalizing the issue before the elections and detracted from the controversy by focusing on the state of the Bundeswehr and the use of drones in military interventions more generally. During the second round of blame game interactions, the minister’s popularity suffered considerably. However, only 33 percent of the public wanted him to resign due to the controversy.

As the opposition could not convict the minister of lying, they appointed an inquiry commission to investigate the government’s involvement in the controversy. During the sessions of the commission, they reaffirmed their position against the minister, calling him a liar who was no longer fit to lead the Bundeswehr.⁴⁶ However, it became clear quite quickly that the opposition could not substantiate the allegations of lying. The minister now adopted a much more

proactive and confident stance when before the commission. While he continued to deflect blame onto his predecessors, he began to defend his undersecretaries. In a partial contradiction of his previous statements, he argued that their actions with regard to the cancellation had been correct.⁴⁷ The publication of the inquiry's results shortly before the elections no longer attracted much public interest.

Consequences of the Blame Game

At first sight, the blame game surrounding the DRONE controversy did not produce notable consequences. The minister remained in office and did not have to sacrifice his undersecretaries. While the minister's reputation temporarily suffered in the polls, the majority of the public never wanted him to resign. The opposition did not succeed in using the DRONE controversy to undermine the government before the upcoming elections.

However, the case reveals a different picture in regard to policy consequences. During the blame game, the minister had already promised to introduce a controlling system for large procurement projects – one of the key recommendations the expert commission had made back in 2010. After the elections in September 2013, in which the CDU managed to remain the strongest party, the CDU politician Ursula von der Leyen replaced Thomas de Maizière as the new defense minister. In the wake of the blame game surrounding the DRONE controversy, the new minister saw herself confronted with a widespread debate about the procurement problems of the Bundeswehr.⁴⁸ The new minister took a tough stance on procurement problems in order to distance herself from her predecessor and introduced several reforms. First, she fired one of her predecessor's undersecretaries to signal that she was not happy with the current information policy within the ministry. Second, she started a transparency initiative by commissioning an evaluation of the largest current procurement projects and established a report system to regularly inform the parliament of the current procurement situation.⁴⁹ Taken together, while the blame game did not lead to immediate personal consequences, it nevertheless sparked an intensive public debate that forced politicians to more proactively address a policy problem that had already existed for a long time.

Context-Sensitive Analysis of Blame Game Interactions

In the following, I show that the extensive policy consequences of the blame game primarily resulted from personalized pressure on political incumbents. Despite low public feedback to the controversy, direct government involvement and extensive conventions of ministerial resignation allowed opponents to attack the minister and, through their attacks, compelled the minister (and his successor) to speed up the policy reform process.

Issue Characteristics

Media coverage and polls suggest that public feedback to the DRONE controversy was rather weak. During the first round of interactions, quality outlets covered the blame game in a detailed but problem-centered way. Tabloids only took up the controversy after the accusation of lying had become a matter of debate, at which point overall coverage became more person-centered and scandalizing. During this more heated phase, the minister took center stage while the controversy as such no longer attracted much attention. Polls also suggest that the public never showed great interest in the controversy. As already mentioned, although the minister's popularity temporarily suffered, there was never a majority that wanted him to resign, despite his prominent involvement in the controversy.⁵⁰ With the exception of the overseas deployment of German troops, military policy issues seldom attract the interest of the German public. The relationship between Germans and their military is, as the former Federal President Horst Köhler put it, characterized by a friendly indifference.⁵¹ Moreover, the public is very used to procurement controversies as Germany has had many of them in recent years. When the media began to cover the DRONE controversy, it initially classified it as a further military procurement fiasco.⁵² What is more, in the long tradition of procurement failures, the financial loss of about €500 million did not stick out much. Nor did the lack of drones immediately threaten German security. Overall, the controversy "basically remained an issue for the political-media complex. The mass of voters didn't care."⁵³

The low salience of the controversy and the absence of implications for ordinary citizens clearly constrained opponents in their blame-generation attempts. During the first round of blame game interactions, they had not yet invested much into blame generation. Instead, their criticism was rather routinized.⁵⁴ While the Left Party tried to connect

the DRONE controversy to a wider debate about the use of drones in military interventions, the SPD and the Green Party proclaimed that the government was simply continuing a sad tradition of money waste. Only once opponents discovered a chance to personalize the controversy by convicting the minister of lying (right before an important election), did they step up their blame-generation efforts and sought to turn the minister into a moral liability for the government (see later). When attacking the minister, opponents duly disregarded the policy problem at the root of the controversy. The latter only acted as background information for personal allegations that, in principle, could have surfaced as part of any other controversy. As the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* observed, the “debate is mainly about whether the minister lied. The very expensive failure of the high-tech project is too much in the background.”⁵⁵ That opponents abruptly changed strategy after the accusation about lying had become a matter of debate further confirms the constraining influence of a distant-nonsalient controversy on blame generation.

The minister also adapted his blame-management approach to changing circumstances. In the beginning of the blame game, he initially ignored criticism and played for time. In a parliamentary debate about the reform of the Bundeswehr, he only mentioned the issue in passing and exhibited a confident stance with regard to its investigation. He also defended the use of drones for reconnaissance purposes and did not yet deflect blame onto his undersecretaries. The minister only adopted a more active blame-management approach after opponents had begun to urge him to resign. In other words, personal attacks triggered a clear change in blame-management strategies. He promised reforms to the procurement system and began to deflect blame onto his undersecretaries. As soon as it had become clear that the inquiry commission could not convict him of personal wrongdoings, he stopped deflecting and reassumed a very confident stance. The media duly noted that the minister had started a frontal attack on his critics.⁵⁶ This effectively shows that the distant-nonsalient controversy alone did not prompt the minister to intensively engage in blame management.

Institutional Factors

During the blame game about the DRONE controversy, the minister benefited from incoherent attacks by opponents. As already mentioned, only the SPD and the Green Party focused their blaming on the minister

and urged him to resign. Meanwhile, the Left Party was more interested in a general discussion about the use of drones in military interventions. The Left Party's diverging focus allowed the government to engage in a lengthy policy debate during which it only had to address the DRONE controversy in passing.⁵⁷

The minister also enjoyed important support from the governing majority. In the beginning of the blame game, while the minister was playing for time and had refrained from making statements before obtaining an overview of what had gone wrong in his ministry, the governing majority had already attacked the opposition for scandalizing the issue and reminded it of its prior involvement in the procurement project. During the second and third round of blame game interactions, when opponents heavily attacked the minister, counterattacks from the governing parties exonerated the minister to some degree and allowed him to act more like a committed crisis manager than an embattled minister dealing out blows left and right. As in the BER case, the governing majority acted as the government's attack device, allowing the political incumbent to take a step back from heated blame game interactions.

Direct government involvement and extensive conventions of ministerial resignation ultimately put the minister in a precarious situation. Although a complex procurement system lay at the root of the canceled project, the blame game quickly centered on the minister's personal involvement in the controversy. In August 2012, before the start of the blame game, the minister had already exhibited a positive stance with regard to the use of drones in armed conflict.⁵⁸ This stance made it particularly implausible for him to claim that he had not been properly informed about the procurement problems of the Bundeswehr's most prestigious drone project at the time. The media thus expressed their doubts when the minister started to deflect blame onto his undersecretaries. High direct government involvement clearly reduced the minister's chances to credibly deflect blame and portray the controversy as an administrative issue.

During the later phases of the blame game, opponents not only blamed the minister for the canceled project; they also portrayed the controversy as a clear reason for him to resign. To achieve this goal, opponents targeted the minister's credibility and integrity. They claimed that if he had a 'spark of decency and respect' for his duties, he should pack his bags and go.⁵⁹ Extensive conventions of resignation explain why opponents tried to turn the minister into a moral liability

for the government. While German government ministers are directly responsible before parliament, the latter lacks instruments to enforce this responsibility. Since, unlike in the British system, there are no rules that define the reasons for which ministers have to resign, the decision about a minister's fate ultimately rests with the chancellor. The latter accordingly makes a cost–benefit analysis over whether it is better for the government to retain or dismiss the minister (Fischer, 2012). Hence, attacking the minister on moral grounds serves to increase the costs of retaining the minister. In the present case, opponents left no doubt about the trade-off the chancellor had to make. They repeatedly urged Merkel to comment on the controversy and reminded her that the minister had become untenable. However, when it turned out that the minister could not be convicted of personal wrongdoings, it was easy for the chancellor to keep the minister.

Finally, the DRONE case reveals further insights into the advantages and disadvantages that opponents have for appointing an inquiry commission during a blame game. The opposition pondered calling for an inquiry commission, and after the interactions in parliament had worn off, they opted to appoint one. The decision was clearly driven by the opposition's goal to create an information basis on which to draw accusations of personal wrongdoings. During the inquiry, however, they had to stop attacking the minister in other venues, in order to avoid appearing hypocritical.⁶⁰ In sum, direct government involvement and extensive conventions of resignation allowed political opponents to put direct pressure on incumbents and prompted them to address a long-existing policy problem (see Table 7 for a schematic assessment of the theoretical expectations).

4.4 *The German Blame Game Style*

In this section, I compare the NSU, BER, and DRONE cases and subsequently consult a test case to verify and refine the conclusions obtained from the comparison. These analytical steps allow me to obtain a clear picture of the German blame game style.

Political Interaction Structure

During German blame games, political incumbents can rely on a loyal and active governing majority. If necessary (see the role of direct

Table 7 *Assessment of theoretical expectations in the DRONE case*

Opponents	Explanatory factor(s)	Expectation	Assessment
Political interaction structure (fragmented/consolidated opposition)		E1: Fragmented opponents, consisting of more than one party, are less successful in crafting a cohesive blame-generating strategy during the blame game than consolidated opponents.	Confirmed. Opposition parties make incoherent attacks on political incumbents.
Institutionalized accountability structures (conventions of resignation)		E3: Opponents facing extensive conventions of resignation concentrate their blaming more on the incumbent politician than opponents facing restrictive conventions, who can only blame administrative actors.	Confirmed. Opponents concentrate their blaming on the minister and portray the controversy as a clear reason to resign.
Institutional policy characteristics (direct government involvement)		E5: Opponents are better able to blame a controversy on incumbents if the latter are directly involved than when the controversy is far removed from incumbents.	Confirmed. Opponents succeed in making the minister appear responsible for the controversy.
Distant-nonsalient controversy		E11: Opponents do not invest much in blame generation on the occasion of a distant-nonsalient controversy.	Partly confirmed. Before the accusation of lying becomes salient, opponents do not invest much in blame generation.

Incumbents	Political interaction structure (loyal/critical governing majority)	E2: Incumbents that receive support from their party(ies) are more successful in reframing a controversy than incumbents that confront criticism from their own ranks.	Partly confirmed. Support from the governing majority does not help the incumbent minister to reframe the controversy but allows him to step out of the firing line.
	Institutionalized accountability structures (conventions of resignation)	E4: Incumbent politicians that must comply with extensive conventions of resignation have greater difficulty defending themselves during a blame game than politicians that must comply with restricted conventions.	Confirmed. The minister has greater difficulty defending himself and therefore steps up his blame management.
	Institutional policy characteristics (direct government involvement)	E6: Incumbents are better able to deflect blame for a controversy onto administrative actors if they are not directly involved in the controversy rather than if they are involved.	Confirmed. Incumbents have difficulty credibly deflecting blame onto the administrative level.
	Distant-nonsalient controversy	E12: Incumbents do not take a distant-nonsalient controversy very seriously and only scarcely engage in blame management.	Partly confirmed. Before the accusation of lying becomes salient, the incumbent only scarcely engages in blame management.

government involvement referenced later), political incumbents can use the governing majority as an attack device that engages in blame game interactions with opponents. A loyal and active governing majority provides political incumbents with several advantages. During the early phases of a blame game, political incumbents can keep out of the firing line and play for time until they possess a better overview of the controversy. Meanwhile, the governing majority already begins to contest and refute opponents' allegations.

Moreover, an active governing majority allows political incumbents to keep out of heated blame game interactions to some degree and to assume a more neutral role as a committed crisis manager. This division of labor also helps political incumbents offset a contradiction inherent in blame-management approaches that aim to reframe a controversy. A political incumbent who downplays a controversy cannot simultaneously deflect blame for it because blame for a controversy 'that actually is no controversy' is unjustified and thus cannot be deflected. Distributing positive reframing and blame deflection onto several shoulders weakens this contradiction to some degree. While the governing majority deflects blame onto other actors somehow involved in the controversy, political incumbents can concentrate on reframing the controversy. Another advantage of an active and loyal governing majority that is apparent in the three cases is that it reminds opponents (early in the blame game) of their prior involvement in a controversy.

Fragmentation between opponents further benefits incumbents during a blame game. In the three cases, there is ample evidence that opponents' different strategies and goals broaden the diversity of issues treated during a blame game. This complicates the blame game and increases the space for political incumbents to maneuver since they can focus on the facets of a controversy that are least threatening to them.

Institutionalized Accountability Structures

While the political interaction structure benefits incumbents, accountability structures in the German political system clearly favor opponents. The cases reveal that extensive conventions of resignation provide opponents with a gateway for personalizing attacks against political incumbents. In the German system, the resignation of a political incumbent over a controversy is not automatically ruled out through clear-cut conventions. Instead, whether or not a political

incumbent is forced to resign is controversy-specific and must be argued out during a blame game. Therefore, opponents have a strong incentive to turn a political incumbent into a moral liability for the government. To do so, opponents must make convincing accusations that the actions or omissions of a political incumbent caused, or at least contributed to, a controversy, or that the incumbent's handling of a controversy was misguided.

The cases suggest that opponents can use an inquiry commission during a blame game to enhance their chances of formulating persuasive accusations. In the German political system, an inquiry commission can be appointed with the support of only a quarter of parliamentarians.⁶¹ An inquiry commission allows opponents to drag a blame game on and to keep a controversy on the political agenda given that summoning political incumbents to testify provides an occasion for future blame game interactions. Moreover, inquiry commissions are a powerful tool through which opponents can retrieve information that allows incumbents to be convicted of personal wrongdoings. In other words, inquiry commissions can provide the informational basis from where to formulate convincing demands to resign.

However, there is a trade-off to appointing an inquiry commission. It induces a venue change that shifts the blame game into a more technical and objectified arena. During the inquiry, opponents must adopt a more constructive approach toward the controversy and refrain from attacking incumbents in other arenas such as in parliament or in the media. Otherwise, opponents risk appearing hypocritical and of being accused of judging before the trial. Hence, opponents must carefully weigh the advantages and disadvantages of appointing an inquiry commission during a blame game. The likelihood of obtaining decisive information during the inquiry and the advantages expected from protracting a blame game are decisive factors in this trade-off.

These insights provide us with a nuanced understanding of the role of inquiry commissions in political conflict. Extant literature mainly focuses on the UK, where the decision to appoint an inquiry commission rests with the government. In this setting, as scholars demonstrate, inquiry commissions facilitate incumbents' nonengagement during blame games and allow them to block other forms of investigation into a controversy (Elliott & McGuinness, 2002; Sulitzeanu-Kenan, 2010). While the German cases confirm these findings, they also show

that in political systems where a minority can easily appoint an inquiry commission, appointment decisions must also be studied from the perspective of opponents.

Institutional Policy Characteristics

Whether or not institutionalized accountability structures develop into a problem for political incumbents largely depends on the degree of direct government involvement in a policy controversy. In the NSU case, low direct government involvement deprived opponents of the opportunity to credibly attack political incumbents. On the contrary, in the BER and DRONE cases, conventions of resignation became causally relevant since direct government involvement allowed the blame for the controversy to be laid onto political incumbents. Direct government involvement is thus an important mediating factor that influences the distribution of power between opponents and incumbents during German blame games.

Test Case: Nitrofen Controversy (NITROFEN)

In this section, I test the findings derived from the three in-depth case studies against a fourth case to improve our picture of the German blame game style. The NITROFEN controversy is a German food scandal that became the object of political conflict in May 2002. Parts of the opposition used the proximate-salient controversy to attack the ‘agricultural turnaround’ policy (Agrarwende) of the SPD and Green Party coalition government.

Policy Struggle

In the early 2000s, nitrofen, an unauthorized carcinogenic herbicide, found its way into the food chain from a warehouse in Malchin, Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, on former Eastern German territory. The warehouse, that stored organic cereals for feed production, had been used as storage for plant protection products before German reunification. Although polluted by these products, the warehouse had not been decontaminated before it had become a cereal storage facility. In November 2001, a baby food producer found nitrofen residues in meat ingredients and subsequently informed the relevant food producer. This set a series of private controls in motion by a number of food

and feed producers. Although contaminants were found, food and feed producers and local authorities did not report the results of these controls to federal authorities because they did not consider them to be a serious health risk. However, in May 2002, organic producer associations directly informed the Federal Ministry of Consumer Protection, Nutrition and Agriculture (BMVEL). The controversy thus revealed the deficiencies of a food safety regulation system that had only recently been updated in response to the BSE (mad cow disease) crisis of 2000.

After the controversy reached the news, federal, state, and local authorities began to frantically search for the source of the contamination, and they finally found it in the Malchin warehouse. Afterward, they quickly announced that the crisis had been solved. However, only shortly after, on June 4, new rumors emerged that the warehouse could not be the sole origin of such large quantities of contaminated feed and food and that conventional (i.e., nonorganic) food was also contaminated. For the coalition government of the SPD and the Green Party, and particularly for the Green politician, Renate Künast, the minister heading the BMVEL, the controversy threatened one of its core policies, the agricultural turnaround, which aimed to markedly increase organic food production in Germany.

Blame Game Interactions

The first round of blame game interactions occurred between the public discovery of the contamination and the premature announcement on June 4 that the source of the contamination had been found. The opposition parties – the CDU, its Bavarian sibling, the Christian Social Union (CSU), and the liberal FDP – and influential agricultural associations detected a chance to damage the government before the federal elections in autumn and to zero in on the agricultural turnaround. They accused Künast of not having detected the contamination earlier, for not having drawn lessons from the BSE crisis, and for failing to install a functioning early-warning system. During the first round of blame game interactions, opponents were already repeatedly urging the minister to resign because she had allegedly known about the contaminations earlier.⁶² The minister quickly reacted to the controversy, which she called an “outrageous” event.⁶³ She promised that there would be a complete clarification of the controversy and introduced several ad hoc measures to find the source(s) of the contamination. She

also tried to decouple the controversy from the agricultural turnaround, portraying the controversy as the result of the old structures that she was in the middle of reforming. Moreover, she deflected blame onto agricultural associations for trying to cover up the scandal and also onto the CDU and the CSU, which had tolerated the old structures at the root of the controversy for too long.⁶⁴ Throughout the first round of the blame game, Künast received ample support from the governing coalition, which mainly deflected blame onto the feed production industry.⁶⁵

The blame game went into a second round when nitrofen was also found in conventional products and the European Union started to investigate and threatened to impose an export ban on German organic food. The opposition parties used these events to repeat their accusations and demands for Künast's resignation. They blamed the minister for a sluggish crisis response and for having given a premature all-clear signal. As an FDP politician put it: "I think the best consumer information policy would be if you resign today. Consumers would then actually be able to breathe a sigh of relief."⁶⁶ However, the minister did not admit any personal fault and continued to blame companies for not having properly informed public bodies. Moreover, she continued to defend the agricultural turnaround and announced compensation payments for organic farmers.⁶⁷ Also, during the second round of the blame game, the governing coalition consistently defended Künast and accused the CDU/CSU of having created structures that were conducive to such contaminations. Bärbel Höhn from the Green Party attacked the opposition: "I ask you: Who is actually responsible for the laws now in force? ... You have for decades been responsible for agricultural policy in this country and are now trying to blame Mrs Künast for what she has not changed yet. I tell you: You are responsible for the laws that are in force today."⁶⁸ As no additional sources of contamination could be identified and because the European Union opted against an export ban, the controversy quickly faded from public interest.

Consequences of the Blame Game

During the blame game, the CDU/CSU clearly failed to tie the controversy to the ruling government and its agricultural turnaround. Nevertheless, the government intensified its nitrofen monitoring scheme, implemented stricter reporting obligations for feedstuff operators and private inspection bodies, and detailed the communication

obligations of these entities.⁶⁹ Moreover, the controversy contributed to putting the issue of toxic residues in feed and food much more prominently on the political agenda for a while.

Test of Preliminary Findings and Summary

In the following, I assess whether the political interaction structure, the institutionalized accountability structures, and the institutional policy characteristics influenced this blame game in ways congruent with the previous findings.

Political Interaction Structure

The blame game regarding the NITROFEN controversy is characterized by an active and loyal governing majority and fragmented opponents. During the two rounds of blame game interactions, the government received constant support from the governing majority, which contested opponents' attempts to tie the controversy to the agricultural turnaround and reminded them of their prior involvement. Moreover, there were clear signs of fragmentation between opponents. During the blame game, the Left Party differed from the CDU/CSU and the FDP in that it refrained from attacking the minister.⁷⁰ Moreover, the CDU/CSU were alone in tying the controversy to the agricultural turnaround. As a traditional supporter of conventional farming methods, the CDU/CSU portrayed the controversy as an organic scandal. This stance is not evident in the FDP's blame-generation attempts.⁷¹ Media coverage suggests that the CDU/CSU's framing of the controversy did not become too dominant during the blame game, especially after nitrofen was also discovered in conventional feed.⁷²

Institutionalized Accountability Structures

Like in the BER and DRONE cases, the political incumbent saw herself confronted with fierce personal attacks and demands for her resignation. Opponents called on the chancellor to decide on the minister's fate. Consequently, the minister could not stay passive during the blame game and had to actively fend off the many personal attacks from opponents. While opponents' chances of turning the minister into a liability for the government had been modest due to low direct government involvement (see later), extensive conventions of resignation still allowed opponents to attack the minister and urge her to

resign. Especially in the run-up to elections, opponents may be tempted to clutch at any straw and accuse political incumbents of being responsible for a controversy, even in situations where their noninvolvement is relatively obvious. In the NITROFEN case, there are no signs that the opposition considered appointing an inquiry commission. This is not surprising if we consider the previously outlined trade-off inherent in doing so. The accusation that Künast had concealed the contaminations from the public quickly turned out to be unsubstantiated. Therefore, it is unlikely that opponents saw an advantage to uncovering additional information during an inquiry in order to pressure the minister.

Institutional Policy Characteristics

Direct government involvement in the NITROFEN controversy was low. As described earlier, the government could decouple the inspection failure from the agricultural turnaround quite early in the blame game, and it convincingly argued that the inspection failure had been a result of the old inspection regime. While low direct government involvement did not prevent opponents from attacking the minister, it provided her with several advantages. First, low government involvement rendered opponents' attacks less credible. The media clearly realized that the controversy had occurred at considerable arm's length from the minister and thus criticized the opposition for too crudely assigning political responsibility to the minister.⁷³ Second, low government involvement allowed the minister to deflect blame onto a wide array of actors and organizations. And third, low government involvement allowed the minister to brusquely reject calls for her resignation. Hence, while we cannot conclude that low direct government involvement completely spares incumbents from personalized attacks, it does provide them with several crucial advantages with which to withstand them.

Summary

Institutional factors in the German political system are conducive to creating a rather aggressive, incumbent-centered blame game. Extensive conventions of resignation and the opportunity to retrieve salient information about a controversy through the appointment of an inquiry commission are powerful tools that opponents can use to hold political incumbents accountable and to force them into heated blame

game interactions. Consequently, blamed incumbents must actively engage in blame management and may be forced to give in to opponents' policy demands. Unlike in the UK system, where institutional factors allow political incumbents to stick to the same blame-management approach throughout a blame game, in the German system, incumbents are forced to adapt their blame-management strategies to rising levels of blame. However, political incumbents also benefit from institutional factors, including an active and loyal governing majority and fragmentation among opponents. Whether the overall institutional configuration is more favorable to opponents or to incumbents largely depends on the degree of government involvement in a policy controversy.