The Risk and Blame Paradox

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The past half century or so has observed relentless pressure on prevailing ways of governing in western states, leading to extensive reconfigurations of political institutions. In this, themes of performance and risk are integral to the recasting of modern politics and government, with the central role of blame providing further insights into these developments.

Risk

Another prominent movement during this time period is the prevailing influence of policies and institutional arrangements oriented around risk. Risk has become a feature across a wide range of domains, such as health and safety standards, the regulation of environmental health and national security. The performance of the modern state has thus been judged according to the composition and effectiveness of its regulatory regimes in mitigating risk (a theme in Hood et al.’s Government of Risk of 2001). Furthermore, there has been a simultaneous drive for ‘risk-based’ policy making. One of the essential questions is, therefore, how decisions are taken under conditions of uncertainty and fear of post mortems. The fallout from failures of risk regulation, such as the mad cow disease (BSE) crisis and the global financial crisis, have brought post mortems seeking to assign blame to a diverse case of actors and institutions – such as bungling ministers, departments that are not fit for purpose, regulators asleep on the job and greedy bankers. The prominence of blame in the aftermath of risk regulation failures strongly indicates its important ex ante role in shaping institutional and policy choices.

Blame

The third, and final, theme in the study of contemporary politics and government therefore relates to concern of policy-makers with the avoidance of blame. The notion of blame avoidance itself has become irrevocably linked with the rolling back of the (welfare) state during the 1980s and 1990s. At the same time, blame avoidance is an influential motivator in government decisions about whether not to regulate certain harms. Questions of performance and risk therefore shape the attribution of responsibility and blame when things go wrong. This provides an important lens for understanding public policy and administrative performance, as well as the variable implementation of principles of governance such as transparency and post-crisis inquiries.

From this perspective it becomes clear, however, that performance (and blame) matters more in some contexts than others. For example, in Britain the attribution of blame has been a recurring feature of school exam fiascos, failures of child care and social work authorities and breakdowns in the criminal justice system. Likewise, propensity of some risks to generate public blame also varies and is not always related to their concrete implications for the wellbeing of society. Low risk eventualities can therefore become major priorities for decision makers preoccupied with the management of public opinion, at the expense of much more probable hazards. As such, blame has emerged as political criterion for the design of institutions and public policy.

The three trends highlight the relationship between institutional design, risk regulation, performance management, and blame. They further reveal an essential paradox of the rhetoric and institutional patterns of risk and blame avoidance (such as in the preference for low blame and low risk configurations of institutional delegation and policy choices), with often ‘risky’ policies and ventures (such as megascale financial service industries that are ‘too big to fail’ and the paradoxical pursuit of large scale ‘mega’ construction and procurement projects renowned for their poor track records), and the controlling tendencies of the modern state (such as target-based performance regimes and the turn towards ‘regulation’ as a mode of governing). These underlying tensions and countervailing forces, have parallels both with the strengths and weaknesses of particular ‘ideal’ types of administration, and with accounts that depict the unstable dynamics of political systems and institutions. One of the pervasive features of contemporary political and administrative life, then, is an uncomfortable tension between over-confidence in planning and managerial systems of measurement and control, combined with the acute sensitivity of decision-makers and institutions to risk and blame. One of the defining questions for the twenty-first century study of government is the degree to which aversion to risk and blame in a wide range of political settings – ranging from the financial sector to health services – can be reconciled with improvements in performance. The pressure for resilience and security combined with pressure for control and performance – and the concern to avoid blame – all at low cost, is prone to eternal disappointment.

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