Policy Leadership and the Blame Trap:
Seven Strategies for Avoiding Policy Stalemate

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Negative messages about political opponents increasingly dominate not just election campaigns in the United States, but the policymaking process as well. And politics dominated by negative messaging (also known as blame-generating) tends to result in policy stalemate. Negative messaging is attractive to politicians because people tend to pay more attention to negative information than positive information, and they are more sensitive to losses than equivalent gains. Political polarization, competitive, nationalized elections, increased fiscal stress and changes in campaign law and practice have all exacerbated pressures to engage in negative messaging in recent years. There are a number of strategies that allow politicians to maneuver around the "blame trap" and avoid policy deadlock in some circumstances, including passing the buck to non-elected bodies and putting in place triggering mechanisms that generate politically unpopular policy changes in the future. All of these strategies have limitations and disadvantages, however, so both blame-generating politics and policy stalemate are likely to be the "new normal" in American politics in the near future.

Blame-Generating as a Political Strategy

Blame-generating is a basic component of modern political life. Negative messaging has always been a staple of election campaigns. But it has also come to dominate other major arenas of American political life. From public and

congressional debates on a variety of policy issues such as debt reduction, immigration reform, gun control or health care reform, to a fight over a judicial or cabinet confirmation, a simple, easily understood negative message about one's opponents can be a critical weapon. Sometimes these messages are conveyed subtly: when President Obama characterizes his gun control proposals as "common sense," for example, he is implicitly saying that anyone who opposes those proposals lacks common sense. And sometimes those messages are largely accurate: George W. Bush in 2005 attempted to sell his proposal for individual investment accounts within Social Security by generating negative messages against Democrats for failing to face up to the program's looming deficits, while Democrats responded with charges that Bush's plan created new risks and didn't restore the program's solvency either. But frequently the negative messages are neither subtle nor accurate, as when prominent Republicans claimed that "Obamacare" would lead to death panels to cut off funding for the elderly and critically ill, and Democrats claim that Bush's Social Security plan would "gut" the program.

There is little doubt that politicians' fixation on generating blame against opponents and their policy positions has negative consequences for the country. Elections dominated by negative campaigning generate cynicism and disgust on the part of the electorate and record-low approval ratings for Congress. They also discourage many able potential candidates from entering or staying in elective politics or accepting appointive positions. Political institutions in which tearing down one's opponents is seen as the surest road to political and policy success have eroded the institutional comity needed to make Congress function and allow the President and Congress to reach agreement on difficult policy issues. Negative politics has also contributed to widespread policy stalemate, as politicians portray compromise as a betrayal of principle and seem incapable of working across party lines. How have things gotten so bad and—more importantly—can anything be done that increases the prospects for seriously addressing the country's pressing policy challenges rather than suffering policy stalemate?

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The roots of today's blame-centered politics are not hard to find. Individuals are susceptible to responding to how an issue is framed: increasing taxes on the wealthiest Americans seems a lot more palatable when it is framed as "asking the wealthiest Americans to pay their fair share," for example, than when it is portrayed as "penalizing hard-working job creators." Negative messages are likely to be especially powerful motivators as a result of what Kahneman and Tversky have referred to as loss aversion: individuals are more sensitive to past or potential losses than to equivalent gains. In addition, individuals tend to have a negativity bias—that is, they pay more attention to negative than to positive information. Thus they are likely to be particularly receptive to negative messaging.

All of these factors create very strong incentives for politicians to engage in negative framing and messaging–saying that the other party is to blame for social ills or that it wants to do things that will make individuals and groups worse off. Moreover, both parties also depend heavily on energizing core constituencies for political contributions, campaign activities, and producing a disproportionate turnout on Election Day. These core constituencies have policy preferences that are frequently far from those of median voters. Of course, party leaders seeking to improve their future electoral prospects also need to find ways to attract new "target" constituencies that are currently divided in their political loyalties and detach core constituencies from the opposition parties by converting, splitting or demobilizing those constituencies. Attacks on the opposition are an effective weapon for doing so. Claims by political parties and candidates that their opponents are out of step with their constituents or "extreme" in their views are especially effective because they shift the focus of attention away from specific policy content toward the opponents' representativeness or judgment.

Negative messaging is not without potential costs to its perpetrators, of course. The most important policy consequence of negative messaging is that it constrains future opportunities for compromise. If Republicans blame Democrats for raising taxes and pledge never to support any tax increase, for example, it will be difficult for them to agree to tax increases without appearing to be liars, hypocrites, or a flip-floppers–all of which are charges that are likely to be made by future opponents in Republican primaries. But in today's polarized political climate, many politicians actually view this as an advantage: by creating a narrow "zone of acceptable outcomes" for themselves, they hope to force the other party to move closer to positions that they favor.

America's politicians, in short, appear to be caught in what can be called the "blame trap": they generate blame against their opponents in order to appease their political supporters and win enough support from undecided voters to win elections. But the usual policy result, given America's system of multiple veto points, is policy stalemate, which generates more public cynicism and makes blame-generating appeals even more credible for the electorate.

Changes in the Political Environment

For most of the first forty years after World War II, politicians in the United States focused on trying to claim credit and avoid blame in primarily localized contests, taking advantage of their substantial leeway to adjust their positions close to those of median voters in their electorates, while gaining voter support by claiming credit for handing out distributive benefits to particular groups of voters. This equilibrium has in recent years been largely supplanted by a new dynamic of nationalized campaigns dominated by negative messaging polarized along ideological lines.

Several developments in the American political and social environment in recent decades have strengthened the temptation for politicians to engage in negative messaging, and weakened constraints on doing so. One critical change is a decline in opportunities for politicians to center their electoral appeals on promises to provide broad benefits through new or expanded programs.

Slower improvements in productivity and overall economic growth have meant that the resources available for allocation by politicians are shrinking. In addition, population aging has resulted in Social Security and Medicare costs that put enormous pressure on existing budgetary commitments, let alone leaving room for new budgetary initiatives. Political parties have not gotten entirely out of the credit-claiming business of course, as the Bush-era-tax cuts, Medicare prescription drug benefits, and recent extensions of Unemployment Insurance benefits show. But the opportunities for doing credit-claiming have shrunk with fiscal stress and a firmer and more united Republican stance that government should do less.

Another major contributor to blame-focused politics is an intense polarization of political elites and activists in the United States along partisan lines, and evidence suggesting a similar but more muted trend among the mass electorate. With increasingly homogeneous and polarized congressional party caucuses, the costs of framing an issue in moralistic, exclusionary terms that are intended to highlight and extend negative perceptions of the opposing party go down. Increased party cohesion also means that there are few opportunities for cross-party coalitions in policymaking, which in turn reduces the costs of unrestrained attacks on members of the other party in Congress or the executive.

As Thomas Mann and Norman Ornstein have noted, this polarization has been asymmetric: Republican politicians are particularly constrained from maneuvering toward local median voter positions for at least two related reasons. First, many of them face a realistic threat of primary challenges from candidates backed by the Tea Party and other groups on the right wing of the party. Second, they are increasingly subjected to pressures to adhere to pledges to avoid new taxes, defend heterosexual marriage, and (for presidential candidates) appoint antiabortion cabinet officials—pledges that they may feel that they need to agree to if they are to prevail in a Republican primary. Fears of a less than perfect "scorecard" grade from groups like the National Right to Life Committee have a similar effect.

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A prolonged period of close partisan competition at the national level (including regular rotation of party control of the presidency, usually on an eight-year cycle, plus fairly frequent changes in majority control of the Senate and House) and heightened gerrymandering in congressional reapportionment have further heightened temptations to blame and weaken incentives for compromise. If you think that the next election and a lot more bashing of the opposition may improve your bargaining position after that election, why give away something now—just pour on the blame.

Changes in campaign finance law and practice in recent years have also contributed to an increase in negative messaging in both electoral politics and in policymaking between elections. Politicians are by no means the only perpetrators of negative messaging. Interest groups, corporations, unions and other societal actors may also generate negative messages against specific politicians,

For these actors, specific policy objectives are likely to be the major drivers of their strategic choices rather than victories in the broader electorate. Supreme Court decisions on campaign finance have broadened the number of players engaged in political and policy messaging and their ability to do so anonymously, lessening potential repercussions. Negative messaging is also perpetrated and amplified by an increasingly partisan television "news" media, talk radio and blogosphere. In short, blame generating is being driven by an explosion in the number of players and funding opportunities, and a decline in entry barriers and constraining norms of balance among the expanded number of media players.

Mistrust in government provides fertile ground for negative messages to be viewed as credible, and therefore more effective. And once Republican politicians came to believe that increasing mistrust in government fit their ideological ends of reducing the size of government, the costs to them of engaging in negative messaging about government institutions were reduced.

Strategies for Avoiding Stalemate

Given the strong short-term incentives for negative messaging, and the fact that most of the changes in the macro-political environment that have driven negative messaging levels in American politics in recent years show few signs of abating, there is little reason to hope that American politics will undergo a shift toward less negativity in the near-or medium term. The best that we can hope for is that politicians will be able to deploy strategies that mitigate the ill effects of pervasive negative messaging and partisan polarization on the policymaking process. There are several strategic options for avoiding policy stalemate in a political environment dominated by negative messaging. Each of these options has distinctive advantages and limitations, and risks. None is suitable for all situations, but together they offer some important opportunities to avoid policy stalemate.

PASSING THE BUCK: A first strategy that politicians can use to try to avoid the blame trap is to pass the buck to non-elected bodies—often temporary commissions—to reach deals behind closed doors without the pressure of staking out and defending partisan and ideological positions. Politicians then come together across party lines to endorse the commission's approach, or at least not to block it from going into effect. In some cases, notably several rounds of military base-closing and realignment commissions, these commissions are procedurally privileged—they go into effective automatically unless Congress votes to reject them.

The passing the buck approach has had several notable successes, notably the Reagan-era commission on Social Security reform, which did include some elected politicians. The commission's recommendations formed the foundation for 1983 legislation that stabilized Social Security's financing for several decades. It should be noted, however, both that the commission came very close to failure and that the pressure to reach an accommodation was intense since the alternative was that the program would not be able to pay full benefits within a few months. Several rounds of military base closing commissions also enjoyed substantial success, aided by special legislative procedures that

only allowed the commission's findings to be accepted or rejected by Congress in their entirety.

The limitations and failures of commissions as policymaking vehicles far outnumber their successes, however. The Bowles-Simpson Commission on deficit reduction in 2011 failed to secure the super-majority support needed even to allow its recommendations to be formally submitted to Congress. Members of the "bipartisan" commission President George W. Bush appointed to examine Social Security reform proposals in 2001 were required to agree in advance to support five principles backed by the president, which Democrats then attacked as stacking the commission and making its findings illegitimate; the commission ended up presenting several options rather than a single recommendation to avoid creating a blame-generating lightning rod that could hurt Republican candidates in the run-up to the 2002 elections.

Passing the buck to commissions has an even more important limitation, however: deep partisan divisions on goals. Congress has been unwilling to grant strong procedural protections that would allow commission recommendations to move policy away from the status quo on most issues that legislators care very deeply about and on which they have deep partisan and ideological divisions. This is especially true of tax policy and entitlement reform, where they fear that a commission could recommend a policy change that they do not like and cannot block. In short, passing the buck to commissions is likely to be most successful where partisan and ideological divides on policy substance are relatively modest but politicians need a collective fig leaf to shield them from voter anger over unpopular policy cutbacks.

GRAND DEALS AND CIRCLING THE WAGONS: A related strategy to passing the buck is for Democratic and Republican leaders to negotiate behind closed doors to try to strike a grand deal on an issue like budgets and taxes or immigration, which they then sell jointly to the public and to rank-and-file legislators ("circling the wagons") as the best deal that is achievable— and better than no deal at all. Efforts to use this approach can be seen most recently in several rounds of budget negotiations between President Obama and House Speaker John Boehner—but so can its limitations. First, the negotiators need to be able to deliver the support of rank-and-file legislators to pass a deal. Otherwise there is little incentive for their negotiating partner to agree to support policy changes that are likely to be very unpopular with their party's base. Second, the rank-and-file needs to be convinced that the gains that they are making are worth whatever sacrifices they are making. But it is unlikely that both parties will have the same perception of the relative weight of specific gains and losses.

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The fact that people tend to value losses from what they have currently more highly than putatively equivalent gains exacerbates this problem: neither side is likely to find what the other side is offering as adequate compensation. Thus Republicans are likely to want larger cuts in entitlement spending for any tax increases than Democrats find acceptable, while Democrats will make the opposite claim. Third, so long as either the negotiators or rank-and-file legislators who must eventually endorse a

package remain firmly committed to the policy status quo as lines in the sand on major issues (e.g., no new tax revenues or no changes to Social Security), there is room only for modest deals rather than grand moves away from the status quo.

GOVERNMENT BY AUTOPILOT: Another strategy for making difficult decisions is to set up a procedure under which reaching some trigger (e.g., deficit levels, or Social Security deficits) leads automatically to programmatic adjustments according to a formula set up in the original legislation unless Congress agrees to overturn it. Policymakers want the program adjustments to take place, but want them to occur with "clean hands": at a temporal distance that allows them to escape electoral accountability for actions that will be unpopular with some portion of the electorate. An example of this strategy is automatic changes (cutbacks in public pension benefits or increases in payroll tax rates or increases in the retirement age) to match increasing longevity and deteriorating pension finances that have been enacted in several European countries.

The autopilot strategy has several shortcomings. First, politicians have to agree on a trigger and on what the consequence of hitting that trigger will be. But this is difficult when there are wide differences in preferences between two fairly unified parties. In setting a Social Security solvency trigger, for example, Republicans would probably refer triggering future increases in the retirement age or reductions in benefits, while Democrats might prefer some increase in payroll taxes. In short, designing an autopilot mechanism is still likely to require ability to reach agreement on what policy changes would be triggered in the future, so it is most likely to be useful when politicians are not very far apart in their policy preferences. Second, politicians who turn on autopilot mechanisms can just as easily turn the autopilot off when it is to their advantage to do so. And that is in fact what often happens. Both Swedish and German politicians softened the impact of "autopilot" pension cuts in the lead-up to their most recent elections, though they did not remove them entirely. Third, auto-pilot mechanisms requiring across-the-board changes in multiple programs are a very blunt instrument when they are applied beyond a single program, as recent debates about budget sequestration in the United States have shown. They make it difficult to set priorities or to make allowances for differences in how programs operate. Thus their applicability, and their utility, is likely to be highly limited.

FEET TO THE FIRE: This strategy starts with the same mechanism as policy by auto-pilot: policymakers set up an automatic mechanism that will trigger politically painful policy changes without politicians themselves pulling the trigger. The objective is different, however: the goal is that the changes set in motion by the auto-pilot mechanism are so unpleasant, and also avoidable, that they will provide an overwhelming incentive for politicians to overcome their differences and enact an alternative. Provisions for automatic budget sequestration is the most important manifestation of this strategy in the United States.

The advantage of this strategy is that it brings to bear politicians' powerful desire to avoid being blamed for unpopular policy outcomes. This strategy also has several disadvantages, however. One is that politicians may simply take their feet away from the fire, with a promise to move them back later. Faced with actually implementing sequestration on January 1, 2013, for example, President

Obama and congressional Republicans backed away from doing so. The "feet to the fire" strategy can have negative macro-economic repercussions, as the "fiscal cliff" appears to have had in the United States, with suppliers cutting production and investment and companies and individuals scrambling to minimize their tax liabilities in an atmosphere of high uncertainty. Of the multiple strategies available to the President and legislators, this is probably the most harmful both to the macro-economy and to rebuilding trust in the capacity of American institutions to function effectively. It should be avoided as much as possible.

EXPERIMENT: On some policy issues where parties are divided, it may be possible to try out different approaches to policy before making a firm choice at the national level. This can be done in several different ways. One is to give more authority to states and localities to experiment with new policy options rather than having a uniform national policy. These innovations can then serve as a "laboratory of democracy," with lessons fed back into policymaking at the national level, or lead to continued differences in policy across states. State-level experimentation has proven useful in providing evidence on what policies could be useful in reforming America's system of supports for low income families, for example. But devolution also carries important limitations and elements of risk. Applied to a program like Medicaid, it could lead to a "race to the bottom" in which states compete to have policies that encourage outmigration of their poorest and most vulnerable residents. And since states tend to develop stakes in policies that they already have in place, it may be difficult to impose (or reimpose) national uniformity in policy after a period of state experimentation, even if some choices are shown to be better than others.

A related approach is to fund rigorous social science evaluations of innovations undertaken either at the state or local level to provide evidence that will lessen ideological divisions. The Obama administration, for example, has promoted such evaluations in policy sectors as teen pregnancy prevention, home visitation, and educational innovation. It is far from clear, however, that Republicans and Democrats will be able to agree on which programs such evaluation experiments should be applied to, or what the purposes of such evaluations should be (notably whether they should be used to provide increasing funding for proven or promising approaches or rather cutting expenditure for ineffective ones). Nor is it clear that Republicans and Democrats could agree on what lessons should be drawn from policy experiments. Indeed, efforts to discredit rigorous evidence and defund efforts to get more evidence have become part of the blame game in policies like climate change and gun violence.

EXECUTIVE ACTION: If a hyper-partisan and divided Congress is unable to break policy stalemates, what about executive action as an alternative? There certainly are some opportunities for breaking stalemate through executive action, as President Obama showed in June 2012 when he suspended deportation of young illegal immigrants who had entered the country illegally. Additional executive action by the Obama administration has been promoted by liberal advocates of action in policy areas such as climate change, gun control home mortgage refinancing, and gay and lesbian rights. But it clearly has limitations as well: most changes taken through executive action are reversible,

relatively modest, and risk being portrayed in Republican blame-generating narratives as the actions of an arrogant president who skirts the law.

COMPROMISE: A final strategy for overcoming the blame trap is the oldest and simplest one: politicians can split the difference with their partisan foes and meet them halfway. This approach was in fact the dominant policymaking approach for most of the post-War era. And it is not entirely dead: it is most likely to prevail on issues where ideological divisions among policy elites and the general public are relatively weak, and interest group and base constituency pressures on the parties are weak or divided. But as noted above, that describes a shrinking policy space in the current hyper-partisan era. It is also a political space that politicians seek to enlarge at their own political peril—especially Republicans, given the threat of primary challenges from the right.

Conclusion

In a period when hyper-partisanship, close partisan competition, divided government, strong incentives for blame-generating, and a proliferation of blame generators have become the "new normal" in Washington, there are no simple one-size-fits-all solutions to side-step the blame trap and avoid policy stalemate. Ultimately, however, the blame trap will continue to bedevil policymakers in Washington so long as they continue to believe any or all of the following: (1) the status quo is better than any compromise that is likely to be acceptable to their partisan opponents, (2) any sign of deviation from policy principle weakens your own bargaining position, (3) political and policy opponents can be bullied or blamed into accepting a position that is closer to your own position, (4) better policy terms are likely to be available after the next election, or the one after that, or the one after that, and (5) policy compromise that reduces potential openings for future blame-generating is not worth the political opportunity cost. So long as these beliefs remain dominant among American politicians, incentives for compromise remain weak, and successful initiatives to dodge the blame trap and avoid policy stalemate will be the exception rather than the rule.

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