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To Credit or to Blame? The Asymmetric Impact of Government Responsibility in Economic News

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Abstract

This article studies the asymmetric effects of credit and blame attributions in economic news on government evaluations. We rely on a dataset combining a manual content analysis of Dutch economic news (print, television, online; $N = 5,630$) with a three-wave panel survey ($N = 3,240$) that was fielded in 2015. Results show that people who are exposed to news in which the government is blamed for the economy tend to adopt this frame by assigning responsibility to the government for the economic crisis. In addition, exposure to blame attributions leads to more negative government evaluations. This effect is partly mediated through the attribution of crisis responsibility. Credit attributions in the news do not have any effect on public opinion.

The attribution of responsibility is at the heart of people's political dispositions. Is living in poverty the consequence of individual-level choices or is it related to an unequal opportunity structure provided by society? Was the economic crisis just a glitch in a system that most of the time runs smoothly or was it caused by a greedy industry over which national governments have no control? Responsibility judgments are the principal mechanism by which citizens may or may not hold political actors accountable: They form the intervening link between evaluations of policy outcomes (e.g., poverty, crisis) and votes that are eventually cast at the ballot box (Hobolt & Tilley, 2014, p. 10).

Research provides two distinct explanations for how responsibility attributions are formed. The first one mainly looks at the impact of internal factors such as people's

political values. In line with their ideological convictions, conservatives are more likely than liberals to assign responsibility to the individual for certain outcomes. In this view, responsibility attributions tend to be rather stable over time, as they are the product of people's long-standing political predispositions (Iyengar, 1994, p. 10). The second explanation points to the role of external influences and assumes more variation. As most political issues are beyond people's personal experiences, their perceptions are sensitive to mediated information when assigning responsibility to actors or institutions for certain policy outcomes (e.g., Hobolt & Tilley, 2014). Responsibility attributions in the news, thus, affect the attribution of responsibility by those who consume it, and, as a result, the latter are volatile over time due to changing media coverage.

We build on these insights by looking at the impact of responsibility attributions in the news on public opinion, while also controlling for people's political predispositions. This study contributes to the literature in several ways. First, as politics is all about claiming credit and denying blame, we distinguish between positive and negative responsibility attributions in the news. Departing from work by Kahneman (1979), we explore whether and to what extent *blame* attributions (i.e., negativity) provoke stronger effects on public opinion than attributions of *credit* (i.e., positivity). Second, while proper credit and blame attributions precede evaluations of political actors by citizens (Malhotra & Kuo, 2008, p. 121), they are seldomly considered in empirical research. We will do this by examining the direct impact of responsibility attributions on government evaluations, as well their mediating role in media effects on government evaluations. Finally, our study exploits a unique combination of datasets. For the first half of 2015, an extensive content analysis of Dutch economic news data is linked to a three-wave panel survey. This type of dataset allows for analyses with high external validity (De Vreese et al., 2017), complementing a field in which the major share of work relies on experimental data.

Literature Review

The Impact of News on Government Evaluations

There is a vast body of literature that revolves around the question how the economy matters for politics, and, more specifically, how economic perceptions matter for government support (e.g., Lewis-Beck & Paldam, 2000). Political communication research has demonstrated that people's attitudes in this regard are influenced by the news they consume. One strand of research looks into the impact of the tone of economic news, demonstrating how negative news, such as recession-related coverage, leads to lower levels of consumer confidence (e.g., Blood & Phillips, 1995). Also, work in which tone is operationalized as a general sentiment—and not as the presence of recession-related references—confirms economic news effects on people's economic evaluations (e.g., Boydston, Highton, & Linn, 2018) and political attitudes (e.g., Sheaffer, 2008). In addition, there is work that demonstrates how the attribution of responsibility is a prominent feature of economic news coverage (e.g., An & Gower, 2009) with subsequent effects on public opinion, for example, by eliciting different levels of political responsibility attributions among those who consume it (e.g., Feezell, Glazier, & Boydston, 2019).

With this study, we combine insights from both research strands by focusing on the presence of positive and negative responsibility attributions in economic news coverage

and the subsequent effects of these credit and blame attributions on people's approval of the government in the realm of the economy. Most citizens have no first-hand experiences with the way in which the national government carries out economic policies; hence, they are bound to use mediated information to form their evaluations. When the media write in positive terms about the government's economic achievements, we expect that people will also evaluate economic performances by the government more positively. Research in the context of campaign news shows how positive evaluations—or “endorsements”—of political candidates in the news also lead to more positive evaluations by citizens (e.g., [Hopmann et al., 2010](#); [Kahn & Kenney, 2002](#)). Very similarly, when the media attribute success to political candidates, electoral support is boosted, whereas the attribution of failure leads to lower levels of support (e.g., [Iyengar, Norpoth, & Hahn, 2004](#)).

In sum, combining these insights—the impact of tone and the attribution of responsibility in terms of success/failure—we expect that exposure to economic news in which the government is attributed credit (“success”) for economic outcomes leads people to think more positively about the government's economic performance, whereas the opposite effect occurs when people are exposed to economic news in which the government is attributed blame (“failure”) for economic outcomes. Formalized into the first hypotheses, we expect the following:

H1a: Exposure to economic news in which the government is attributed credit has a positive impact on evaluations of government's economic performance.

H1b: Exposure to economic news in which the government is attributed blame has a negative impact on evaluations of government's economic performance.

People do not value positive and negative information similarly. Work in behavioral economics has produced a vast amount of empirical evidence demonstrating how people attach greater weight to negative information in comparison to equally extreme positive information (e.g., [Kahneman, 1979](#)). This *negativity effect* has been studied extensively across research fields and is also empirically confirmed in work on economic news effects: Negative economic news makes people more pessimistic about the national economy, whereas positive economic news does not provoke the equivalent counter-effect (e.g., [Damstra & Boukes, 2018](#); [Soroka, 2006, 2014](#)). Simply put, the effects of bad news are stronger than those of good news. Applied to the hypotheses of this study, we thus expect that the influence of blame attributions (*H1b*) will be stronger than the impact of credit attributions (*H1a*). Therefore, *H1c* reads:

H1c: The impact of blame attribution in the news on evaluations of the government's economic performance is stronger than the impact of credit attribution in the news.

The Impact of News on the Attribution of Responsibility

As the concept of responsibility lies at the heart of democratic politics, the formation of responsibility attributions has long been studied by political scientists. A number of factors are identified that affect whether and under what conditions people attribute responsibility to the government for the economy. First, the institutional context matters. The more complicated the political system is (i.e., divided government), the more difficult it becomes for people to attribute responsibility to political actors (e.g., [Anderson,](#)

2000; Gomez & Wilson, 2003; Hobolt & Tilley, 2014). Second, on an individual level, research has shown that partisanship has an impact on the formation of responsibility attributions (e.g., Rudolph, 2003b; Tilley & Hobolt, 2011). When the economy does well, people are more likely to attribute responsibility to institutions that are controlled by their preferred party than to institutions controlled by the opposition (and vice versa under unfavorable economic conditions, see e.g., Marsh & Tilley, 2010; Rudolph, 2003a). Finally, economic ideology codetermines responsibility attributions: Economic conservatives are less likely to hold the government accountable because they do not believe the government should intervene much in the economy in the first place (e.g., Kim, Carvalho, & Davis, 2010).

As valuable as these explanations are, they neglect the impact of (mediated) information. Work in political communication has repeatedly demonstrated how information cues have substantial impacts on public opinion, including attributions of responsibility (e.g., Hameleers, Bos, & de Vreese, 2017; Hobolt & Tilley, 2014). In their study on the attribution of blame in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, Malhotra and Kuo (2008) conduct a survey experiment, exposing participants to information about the political actors involved. Their results show how blame attribution is affected by information on government officials' positions and party affiliations. Exposure to these types of information establishes new associations in the minds of people and reactivates existing associations, making them more salient and accessible.

This impact of information cues on responsibility attributions speaks to the literature on framing effects in which the attribution of responsibility is regarded as the essence of diagnostic framing (e.g., Entman, 1993; Snow & Benford, 1988). This *core framing task* entails two aspects: (a) a diagnosis of some event as problematic and in need of repair as well as (b) the attribution of responsibility, or blame, for this problematic state of affairs (Snow, Vliegenthart, & Ketelaars, 2018, p. 306). Research has shown that (news) messages emphasizing who should be blamed for political or social problems matter for citizens' attitudes in this regard, as people tend to adopt the responsibility attributions they were exposed to (e.g., Hobolt & Tilley, 2014; Valkenburg, Semetko, & de Vreese, 1999). Gross (2008), for example, showed that episodic frames, which emphasize the role of the individual, decrease the opposition to mandatory minimum sentences as compared with thematic frames that place issues into a broader context. This kind of framing thus puts blame on the individual in a manner similar to what Iyengar (1994) predicted.

Work on populist communication demonstrates similar media effects: News messages in which the "corrupt" elite (national government or EU) is attributed responsibility for causing a crisis affects the perceptions of people, because they tend to adopt the attributed responsibility that is laid out in the media (Hameleers, Bos, & de Vreese, 2017). Applied to the topic of the economy, Van Dalen, Svensson, Kalogeropoulos, Albaek, and de Vreese (2018) find that attribution of responsibility for the crisis in economic news content influences to whom the audience attributes responsibility. Although the bulk of the literature deals with responsibility attributions in terms of blame, similar media effects can be anticipated for the positive equivalent, namely, the attribution of responsibility in terms of credit. When the national government is given credit in the news for the state of economic affairs, people will adopt this frame and attribute similar positive responsibility to the government.

Taken together, these considerations lead us to expect that exposure to economic news in which the government is attributed responsibility influences the responsibility

attribution in the minds of citizens. A crisis is the quintessential event for which people seek causes and make attributions (Coombs & Holladay, 2004), and, therefore, we select an economic crisis as the economic event for which people may or may not attribute responsibility to the national government. We expect that consuming news in which the government is credited for economic developments will make it less likely that people assign responsibility to the government for the economic crisis. And, in a similar way, we expect that exposure to news in which the government is blamed for economic developments will evoke negative impressions and make it more likely that people also assign responsibility to the government for having caused the economic crisis. We thus hypothesize:

H2a: Exposure to economic news in which the government is attributed credit makes it less likely that people assign causal responsibility to the government for the economic crisis.

H2b: Exposure to economic news in which the government is attributed blame makes it more likely that people assign causal responsibility to the government for the economic crisis.

Furthermore, we expect that the *negativity effect* discussed above will also be applicable to these media effects. In other words, we expect that the impact of blame attribution in the news on people's perceptions of the government's crisis responsibility is stronger than the impact of credit attribution. Therefore, *H2c* reads:

H2c: The impact of blame attribution on the likelihood of assigning causal responsibility to the government for the crisis is stronger than the impact of credit attribution.

The Mediating Role of Responsibility Attributions

While the antecedents of government approval in the realm of the economy have been studied before, there is not much research that looks into the role of responsibility attributions. This is surprising, as the assignment of responsibility is the necessary prior step in understanding how evaluations of political actors are formed (Malhotra & Kuo, 2008, p. 132). Basing this study on work by Boukes, Boomgaarden, Moorman, and De Vreese (2015), we expect that the news effects on citizens' government evaluations (*H1a* and *H1b*) are *mediated* by attributions of responsibility. As we measure responsibility attributions in a negative way—the degree to which people assign responsibility to the government for the most severe economic crisis of the last decades—we expect that the impact of citizens' responsibility attributions on government evaluations is negative. If people believe that the government bears responsibility for having caused the crisis, they will also evaluate the government's overall economic performance in more negative terms (see also Singer, 2018).

Boukes, Boomgaarden, Moorman, and De Vreese (2015) demonstrate how exposure to policy-related news frames has an indirect effect on citizens' policy evaluations. The way a policy problem is portrayed by the media affects the degree to which people consider the government responsible. Subsequently, these responsibility attributions lead to more or less support for government policies. In a similar vein, we expect that citizens' responsibility attributions mediate the effect of credit and blame attributions in the news on government evaluations. In sum: When the government is given credit

(blame) in the news for economic outcomes, people tend to adopt this frame and assign less (more) responsibility to the government for the economic crisis. Subsequently, they tend to be more (less) positive about the government's economic policies.

These considerations lead us to hypothesize, first, a direct negative effect of responsibility attribution for the crisis on government evaluations, and, second, a mediated effect of credit and blame attributions in economic news on government evaluations *through* the attribution of crisis responsibility to the government. Therefore, the last hypotheses read:

H₃: Responsibility attribution to the government for the economic crisis has a negative impact on evaluations of government's economic performance.

H_{4a}: The impact of credit attribution in the news on evaluations of government's economic performance is mediated through crisis responsibility attribution.

H_{4b}: The impact of blame attribution in the news on evaluations of government's economic performance is mediated through crisis responsibility attribution.

Figure 1 provides an overview of all relationships under study.

Figure 1.
Conceptual model.



Data and Method

To test the hypothesized effects, we make use of a unique dataset in which a content analysis of economic news coverage is linked to a three-wave panel survey. We now discuss how both types of data were collected, followed by a description of the Dutch economic and political context during time of data collection. Finally, we discuss and explain the methodological approach that was adopted to analyze our data.

Content Analysis

With the help of 22 student coders, we conducted an extensive content analysis of economic news in a wide variety of Dutch news outlets. The analysis took place during the first months of 2015 (February to April). We analyzed the content of newspapers, websites, and a selection of television programs. Economic news was defined in rather broad

terms: The dataset includes news about macro-economic developments as well as news on economic subthemes such as unemployment rates, inflation, or the housing market. For each type of news outlet, we describe the selection of sources leading up to our final dataset consisting of 5,630 economic news items (Table 1).

Newspapers. We collected all economic news articles (not a sample) from the 10 most read newspapers of the Netherlands. To do so, we relied on *LexisNexis*. A total of 4,439 articles stemming from three national broadsheets (*NRC*, *Trouw*, and *Volkskrant*), two national tabloids (*Algemeen Dagblad* and *Telegraaf*), one national financial broadsheet (*Financieele Dagblad*), one national free newspaper (*Metro*), and three regional newspapers (*Dagblad van het Noorden*, *Gelderlander*, and *Noordhollands Dagblad*) were analyzed. The selection of print media covers all widely circulated and well-read Dutch newspapers. Furthermore, they form a diverse variety of outlets as they differ in terms of style (broadsheet vs. tabloid), focus (national vs. regional) as well as ideological orientation (left-leaning vs. right-leaning).

Online news. We retrieved all economic articles from *nu.nl*, which is the most-read Dutch news website. In addition, we selected a random sample of approximately 25% of all economic news items from four other news websites frequently visited in the Netherlands. These websites are *NOS.nl* (news website public broadcaster), and *NRC.nl*, *Volkskrant.nl*, and *Telegraaf.nl* (websites newspapers). In sum, 757 online news items were selected and analyzed.

Television news. A diverse set of television programs was selected. We have included not only traditional newscasts from a public (*NOS Journaal*) and commercial broadcaster (*RTL Nieuws*) but also journalistic programs with a different format that reach out to a broad audience. We included a business magazine (*RTL Z*), two current affairs programs (*EenVandaag* and *Nieuwsuur*), and two news programs with a specific Dutch domestic focus (*EditieNL* and *Hart van Nederland*). The selection has led to a diverse set of programs, differing in terms of broadcaster (public vs. commercial), focus (open vs. domestic), and target audiences (financial professionals vs. lay audience). Together, 434 economic TV news items were analyzed.

As our main independent variables, we look at economic news in which the government is assigned credit or blame for the economic situation. The attribution of responsibility is measured with four items; two items assessing whether the government was attributed responsibility for the past economic situation (one item about positive

Table 1.
Media Data per Outlet per Wave

Source	Published before Wave 2	Published before Wave 3	Total (N)
Newspaper articles	2,377	2,062	4,439
Online articles	373	384	757
Television news items	214	220	434
Total (n)	2,964	2,666	5,630

responsibility, one item about negative responsibility), and, similarly, two items asking whether the government was attributed responsibility for the future economic situation (again, one dealing with positive responsibility and one dealing with negative responsibility).¹ As the temporal aspect (retrospective vs. prospective) lies beyond the theoretical focus of this study, we have combined the items asking about past and future responsibility into one measure, as we are interested in the attribution of credit and blame in general. Table 2 displays the descriptive statistics of these variables, indicating that credit attribution in the news was slightly more present during the time of data collection than was the attribution of blame.

The coders were trained extensively and the coding process was carefully supervised. Inter-coder reliability (ICR) was assessed using 137 news items that were analyzed by a minimum of three coders (on average by 5.85 coders, resulting in 801 uniquely coded items). We used the Nograd 1.1 tool (Wettstein, 2018) to calculate the reliability measures. For each of these items, the ICR yielded satisfactory results.²

Panel Survey

Three waves of an online panel survey were fielded in the Netherlands in 2015 (i.e., Wave 1 on February 23, Wave 2 on April 20, and Wave 3 on June 15). Data collection was operated by *I&O Research*, an ISO-certified research company. Respondents were recruited by random sampling from population registers. A total of 9,112 participated in the first round in February, with 6,386 of them completing the questionnaire (completion rate: 70.1%). Only those who delivered a complete survey were approached for the next wave; a total of 3,240 respondents completed all three questionnaires (28% attrition per wave). From the start, the sample was not fully representative of the Dutch population on a number of demographics. The sample's skewness continued to be similar across waves and in the final sample, respondents who were male (66.7%), higher educated (50.4% higher vocational education or university degree), and relatively old ($M = 61.42$, $SD = 11.08$) were over-represented. However, this study's focus is not on providing point estimates of the population in general, but, instead, on obtaining a better understanding of the *mechanisms* driving news effects on political attitudes. Therefore, we consider these deviations not too problematic.

Evaluations of government's economic performance. In all three survey waves, evaluations of government's performance were measured in a straightforward way, asking respondents to answer the following question on a 7-point scale: *How beneficial do you think the national government's policies have been with regard to the national economy on a scale from 0 (not beneficial at all) to 6 (very beneficial)?*

Attribution of crisis responsibility to government. As the mediating variable of this study, we look at the responsibility that people assign to the national government for the most severe economic issue of the past few decades: the economic crisis. In all

¹See Supplementary Appendix SA for the exact coding questions

²Government responsibility past and positive: Holsti % agreement: 97.6%; Std. Lotus = 0.956

Government responsibility past and negative: Holsti % agreement: 94.8%; Std. Lotus = 0.911

Government responsibility current/future and positive: Holsti % agreement: 91.4%; Std. Lotus = 0.926

Government responsibility current/future and negative: Holsti % agreement: 97.1%; Std. Lotus = 0.971

three waves, this attribution was measured by an open-ended survey question in which respondents were asked: *Which actor(s) do you think has/have most responsibility for causing the economic crisis?*³ All answers referring to the government (parties) or national politics were given the value “1,” all other answers were coded “0.”⁴

Control variables. There is an extensive literature on the impact of partisanship on responsibility attributions as well as on evaluations of (government) performance. Research has shown that partisans are disproportionately likely to attribute responsibility for favorable economic conditions to political actors from the own party while they tend to blame the opposition for unfavorable conditions (e.g., Rudolph, 2003a, 2003b; Tilley & Hobolt, 2011). Furthermore, partisans are more likely to believe that political actors from the own party are capable of solving economic issues (Peffley, Feldman, & Sigelman, 1987). It is, thus, paramount to control for partisanship in all of our analyses. We do so by including two variables that tap into people’s political preferences. First, we include a measure of electoral utility by asking respondents: *If elections were to be held today, how likely would it be that you would vote for [party]?* Answers range from 0 (*not likely at all*) to 10 (*very likely*). This measure is preferred over vote choice, especially in a multiparty system context like the Dutch one (Van der Eijk, Van der Brug, Kroh, & Franklin, 2006), as it provides more detailed information on the evaluation of individual parties. We combine the items measuring support for the *Liberal Party (VVD)* and support for the *Labor Party (PvdA)*, as these two parties were governing when the survey was fielded. Together, these items measure the probability to vote for the (then) current government, resulting in a scale ranging from 0 (*not likely at all to vote for government*) to 20 (*very likely to vote for government*). Second, we include a variable measuring respondents’ ideological self-orientation by means of the question: *Regarding politics, people often refer to left versus right. On a scale from 0 (very left) to 10 (very right), could you indicate how left or right your own political views are?*

Respondents were asked how many days per week they read or watch each of the specific news outlets included in the content analysis. This generated a series of scores for each respondent indicating the degree to which they consumed each of the included media outlets on a weekly basis. These scores were converted into variables ranging from 0 (*minimal use*) to 1 (*maximal use*). In a next step, we linked the scores to the data from the content analysis that indicates whether or not the government was attributed credit or blame in each specific news item.

The media content to which people were exposed between Wave 1 and Wave 2 was used to predict public opinion items measured in Wave 2 and consumed media content between Wave 2 and Wave 3 predicted the public opinion items measured in Wave 3. More specifically, for each respondent, their media consumption score (specified by outlet) was multiplied by the presence of credit/blame attributions in that particular outlet. The scores of exposure to credit/blame attributions for all the outlets were then summed for each respondent, generating a respondent-specific value of total exposure to credit and blame attributions in the news during the preceding weeks. In other words, consumption of multiple news sources in which credit or blame attributions

³See Supplementary Appendix for the exact wording of the questions and information about the order of the items.

⁴Presence of government as responsible actor: Holsti % agreement: 95.3%; Std. Lotus = 0.901

were present was accounted for by generating a higher overall summed score of all specific outlet consumptions.

The linkage of actual media content (i.e., the attribution credit/blame) to repeated survey measurements (i.e., crisis responsibility attributions, government evaluations) allows for a test of causal relationships that has higher external validity than analyses based on experimental data can provide, generating more insight into mechanisms driving media effects than aggregate-level studies are able to give (De Vreese et al., 2017). For each respondent (i) before every wave (j), exposure to a specific outlet (k) was multiplied by the presence of credit or blame attribution in the news item within this specific outlet. This procedure can be summarized by the following formula: $Credit/blame\ attributions_{ij} = \sum exposure\ to\ [outlet\ k_i] \times credit/blame\ score\ of\ [outlet\ k_j]$.

In addition, a scale was created measuring the *overall* consumption of news in all outlets, regardless of the content. We add this general news consumption variable as a control, and to account for the demographics of our sample, we also control for gender, age, and level of educational attainment. Table 2 provides an overview of the descriptive statistics of all variables.

Table 2.
Descriptive Statistics of All Variables

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Min.	Max.
Media data				
Government credit in the news	26.73	17.82	0	143.29
Government blame in the news	23.18	15.99	0	119
Panel survey data				
Evaluations of government	2.10	1.51	0	6
Crisis responsibility	0.20	0.40	0	1
Probability to vote for government	4.94	4.20	0	20
Ideological self-orientation	5.00	2.07	0	10
News exposure	0.96	0.79	0	6
Gender (male = 0; female = 1)	0.33	0.47	0	1
Age	61.42	11.08	17	91
Education ^a	5.02	1.56	1	7

^aLevel of educational attainment is measured by means of a 7-point scale: 1 = *primary education*; 2 = *pre-vocational education*; 3 = *lower secondary education*; 4 = *vocational education*; 5 = *higher secondary education*; 6 = *higher vocational education*; 7 = *university education*.

Economic and Political Context during the Period of Data Collection

Data were collected during the first half of 2015 (February to June). In this period, the national economy of the Netherlands was gradually recovering from the severe economic crisis. Illustrations of this recovery are upward trends in stock and housing markets, and growing levels of purchasing power. In addition, national unemployment rates went down from 7.1% in February to 6.9% in June.⁵

The Netherlands has a multiparty system with a coalition government that shares the responsibility of policy-making. The composition of the Dutch government was

⁵All numbers can be retrieved from the digital archives of Statistics Netherlands: www.cbs.nl

stable during the time of data collection: The Liberal Party (*VVD*) and the Social Democrats (*PvdA*) governed from 2012 to 2017. During the first half of the economic crisis (2007–2010), the government consisted of the Social Democrats (*PvdA*) and the Christian Democrats (*CDA*), during the second half (2010–2012), the Liberal Party (*VVD*) governed with the Christen Democrats (*CDA*).⁶ The governing parties in 2015, thus, both carried responsibility for policy-making during the crisis years, albeit not in a joint coalition. In March 2015, elections for the provincial government were held; however, these are generally deemed “second-order elections” and turnout is typically low (Dandoy & Schakel, 2013). The 2015 elections are no exception to this pattern, with only 47.8% of the electorate casting their vote.

Analysis

To explain government evaluations, we use regular regression models, with lagged dependent variables and clustered standard errors (per respondent). This approach implies that we test in a rather conservative manner, as we account for initial levels of the dependent variables as well as for background characteristics. Since we need the survey data from Wave 1 in order to include lagged values of the dependent variables, each respondent is present twice in the analyses. To explain the impact of news on people’s attribution of responsibility for the crisis to the government, we rely on logistic regression models with, again, lagged dependent variables and clustered standard errors (per respondent). In order to assess mediation effects, we use Sobel tests, as developed by Baron and Kenny (1986).⁷ In all of the analyses, we include waves to control for overall trends of the dependent variables over time.

Results

Table 3 shows the results of the regression analyses predicting government evaluations. In the first model, we look at the direct impact of exposure to credit and blame attributions in the media without considering the mediating impact of assigning crisis responsibility. We see that only the attribution of blame has an effect. When the government is credited in the news for economic outcomes, there is no subsequent effect on public opinion; people do not become more positive about the functioning of the government in this regard. Therefore, we reject *H1a*. In contrast, when the government is attributed blame in the media, we do find a direct, negative effect on government evaluations. We, thus, accept *H1b* as well as *H1c*, as the negative effect of blame attribution is significantly stronger than the positive—but insignificant—effect of the attribution of credit, $F = 24.54, p < .001$.

Table 4 shows the results of the logistic regression analysis. Again, we find very different effects for the attribution of credit in the news versus the attribution of blame. The effect of the attribution of credit runs in the expected direction (exposure to credit attribution leads to less assignment of crisis responsibility); however, this effect is not statistically significant ($p = .754$). In contrast, the attribution of blame in the news

⁶Since the Christian Democrats (CDA) were part of the coalition during the crisis years, it might be that economic evaluations of this party are also affected by responsibility attributions. We did not measure the perceived economic performance of individual parties, but additional analyses reveal that general support for the CDA in terms of vote propensity is not affected by attribution of crisis responsibility to the government.

⁷As we deal with panel data here, we did not opt for bootstrapping techniques. However, as the size of our sample is large, different mediation techniques most likely yield similar results (see Hayes & Scharkow, 2013).

Table 3.
Linear Regression Analysis Explaining Government Evaluations

DV: Evaluation of government's economic performance

	Model 1 <i>b</i> (SE)	Model 2 <i>b</i> (SE)
Constant	0.032 (0.110)	0.154 (0.111)
Lagged dependent variable	0.589*** (0.013)	0.577*** (0.014)
Government attributed credit in the news ($t - 1$)	0.002 (0.003)	0.002 (0.003)
Government attributed blame in the news ($t - 1$)	-0.010*** (0.003)	-0.009** (0.003)
Attribution crisis responsibility ($t - 1$)		-0.219*** (0.036)
Probability to vote for government ($t - 1$)	0.060*** (0.004)	0.059*** (0.004)
Left-right orientation	0.024*** (0.006)	0.026*** (0.006)
News exposure	0.120*** (0.032)	0.116*** (0.032)
Gender	0.038 (0.027)	0.043 (0.027)
Age	0.003 (0.001)	0.002 (0.001)
Education	0.040*** (0.009)	0.035*** (0.009)
Wave	0.072* (0.034)	0.068* (0.034)
R^2	0.4627	0.4656
<i>N</i>	6,480	6,480

Notes. Values are unstandardized coefficients and standard errors.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Table 4.
Logistic Regression Analysis Explaining Attribution of Crisis Responsibility

DV: Attribution of crisis responsibility to national government

	<i>b</i> (SE)
Constant	-0.667* (0.263)
Lagged dependent variable	1.521*** (0.079)
Government attributed credit in the news ($t - 1$)	-0.002 (0.006)
Government attributed blame in the news ($t - 1$)	0.015* (0.007)
Probability to vote for government ($t - 1$)	-0.065*** (0.001)
Left-right orientation	0.027 (0.016)
News exposure	-0.223** (0.083)
Gender	0.174** (0.068)
Age	-0.010** (0.003)
Education	-.139*** (.021)
Wave	0.097 (0.075)
Pseudo R^2	0.1170
<i>N</i>	6480

Notes. Values are unstandardized coefficients and standard errors.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

provokes a positive effect that reaches the level of statistical significance ($p = .027$): The more people were exposed to news in which the government was attributed blame for the economic situation, the more likely they were to hold the government accountable for having caused the crisis. Based on this, we reject $H2a$ and accept $H2b$. Furthermore, we accept $H2c$, as the positive effect of blame attribution is significantly stronger than the (insignificant) negative effect of the attribution of credit, $\chi^2 = 13.01$, $p < .001$. The negative effect of probability to vote for the government on the attribution of crisis responsibility speaks to prior work demonstrating how voters adjust their views of who is responsible in line with their partisanship (see Tilley & Hobolt, 2011). People who are more likely to vote for the current government tend to absolve the government parties of causal responsibility for the economic crisis.

In the second model of Table 3, we examine whether the effects of credit and blame attributions in the news on government evaluations are mediated by the attribution of crisis responsibility. To do so, we first need to check whether the mediating variable has the anticipated direct impact on government evaluations. The negative and highly significant coefficient ($b = -0.219$, $p < .001$) confirms that this is indeed the case: When people hold the government accountable for causing the economic crisis, they have less appreciation for its economic performance, which leads us to accept $H3$. Taking note that credit attribution in the news does not have an impact on government evaluations, nor on crisis responsibility attributions, we reject $H4a$: The impact of credit attribution in the news on evaluations of the government's economic performance is not mediated through crisis responsibility attributions.

In the second model, the coefficient of blame attribution in the news is slightly weaker, $b = -0.009$, $p < .001$, now that crisis responsibility attribution is added to the equation. To see whether this responsibility attribution actually *mediates* the impact of blame in the news, we conduct the Sobel test for mediation. The results indicate that, indeed, the news effect of blame attribution on government evaluations is partly mediated through the attribution of responsibility for the crisis to the government (Sobel test = -2.021 , $p = .043$). In other words, people are sensitive to the attribution of blame by the media and we confirm $H4b$. When exposed to this frame, people become more likely to blame the government for the crisis, which, in turn, co-shapes their normative evaluations of how the government performs on economic matters. This causal mechanism does not apply in the context of positive responsibility attribution.

Discussion

This study examined how credit and blame attributions in the news have an impact on evaluations of government performance. The results speak to the literature on the psychological processing of valenced information: Hypothesized news effects were only confirmed for the negative version of responsibility attribution. When the government is *blamed* by the media for causing an economic situation, the consequences are real: News consumers become more likely to also blame the government for the crisis, and, partly as a result of that, they evaluate the government's economic performances more negatively. However, when the government is *given credit* for the economic situation in the news, the opposite causal chain fails to apply.

It is important to note that the predominant effects of blame attribution cannot be ascribed to coverage that was overwhelmingly negative. During the time of data

collection (Spring 2015), West-European countries, including the Netherlands, were actually recovering from the economic crisis and witnessed modest economic growth rates. In line with this, there was more credit attribution in the news during these months than blame attribution, as is also illustrated by the descriptive statistics in Table 2.

The results suggest that the negativity effect is even more pervasive than work on asymmetric news effects has demonstrated already (e.g., Damstra & Boukes, 2018; Soroka, 2006). Whereas most research compares the effects on public opinion of positive versus negative news, no study has applied this framework to the impact of responsibility attributions, that is, the effects of credit versus blame in the news. Again, we see that negativity is a very powerful content characteristic. People are sensitive to blame and not so much to credit. Regardless of whether responsibility for policy change is real or perceived, the potential costs of being blamed in the news are (much) bigger than the potential benefits of being given credit, as the public is more likely to penalize elected officials for errors than to reward them for successes. In this light, it is not surprising that politicians are committed to deny or shirk responsibility when policy outcomes are bad (see also Iyengar, 1991, pp. 8–9). Election campaigns are illustrative in this regard. Politicians claim credit for a good economy, but they work even harder to distract (media) attention from the economy when conditions worsen (Vavreck, 2009).

This dynamic has consequences for policy-making. Political actors are aware that policy change comes with the risk of being held publicly accountable and that the news is difficult to control, even for the most powerful elites (Boydston, 2013). Focusing on avoiding blame will discourage policy-makers from pursuing policies that significantly alter the status quo (Soroka, 2014) in favor of more incremental policy strategies. Whereas political scientists have identified a number of factors encouraging incrementalism, such as the structure of institutions (e.g., Lindblom, 1979), the asymmetric impact of negative versus positive responsibility attributions is likely an additional one.

While there is quite some work that demonstrates how partisanship functions as a perceptual lens influencing responsibility attributions and political evaluations (e.g., Rudolph, 2003a, 2003b), our results suggest that mediated information makes a difference on top of that: People are sensitive to the (negative) news they consume. This is in line with findings by Malhotra and Kuo (2008), who also conclude that citizens are not absolute party loyalists but, instead, remain open to relevant information.

Of course, this study is not without limitations. To examine the adoption of credit and blame attributions in the news by those who consume it, it would have been better to also ask people about the degree to which they credit or blame the government for (un)favorable economic situations. Instead, we have used the item measuring the degree to which people attribute causal responsibility for the economic crisis to the government. This is a proxy, and that comes, inevitably, at the expense of accuracy; the current findings are probably conservative, as we would expect that tracing the effects of credit and blame attributions in the news on similar credit and blame attributions in the minds of people would yield stronger results. That said, we hope to have provided a valuable point of departure by demonstrating how blame attributions in the news—and not credit attributions—are readily adopted by news consumers and have real consequences for how the government is evaluated by the public.

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Supplementary Data

Supplementary Data are available at *IJPOR* online.

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