



Breaking blame: uncovering third-party strategies for contesting political blame in the Brexit referendum campaign

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Abstract

Blame is inextricable from politics, as exemplified by the Brexit referendum campaign. While existing literature locates the strategies officeholders use to avoid or shift blame, there is a lack of research into what third parties do to contest political blame when they encounter it. To this end, this paper applies qualitative content analysis, complemented by quantitative data, to pre-referendum materials from Leave.EU and the Stronger In campaigns ($N=355$), Brexit-related articles in *The Metro* ($N=60$), and a survey-experiment conducted amongst the UK voting public ($N=1368$). Three types of contestation strategy are identified: direct (counter-blaming, rebuttal, justification, and naming and shaming blame); displacement (credit and threats); and changing subjects and objects. This paper opens a research agenda into what people other than politicians themselves can do to contest blame, renders visible third-party audiences such as the public in political blame games, and incidentally highlights the failure of Remain to engage with blame during the referendum campaign.

Keywords Blame · Counter-blaming · Brexit · British politics · Qualitative content analysis · Survey-experiment

Introduction

It seems common sense that politicians blame one another, and that according and avoiding blame is integral to politics (Hood 2002; Leong & Howlett 2017, p. 3; Weaver 1986). However, while studies have considered how officeholders allocate and avoid blame, it remains unclear how *other* people such as the public contest such blame. This is important, as battles are not won only between politicians, but

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also in the hearts and minds of those that support or oppose them. It is only by asking *what third parties do to contest political blame* that we can comprehend the outcomes of blame games.

This question is examined here through analysing texts pertaining to the UK referendum to leave the EU. Third party blame is understood as “blame addressed to other observers in the offender’s absence” (Malle et al. 2014, p. 174), as where the EU was blamed in the Brexit referendum campaign. Third party contestation is thus where people argue against blame in the offender’s absence, or on the offender’s behalf.

This work’s primary contribution is in providing a toolkit on how blame may be contested by parties beyond just politicians who themselves are blamed. To this end, the paper makes the conceptual contribution of third parties as actors who contest political blame, several of the ways in which they may do so, and particularly, ways in which parties may be *limited* in what they can do to manage blame. This is fundamental to later testing the ways in which third-party contestation of blame may mitigate its effects. A secondary contribution, given the Brexit case study, is in highlighting the role of poor blame management on the Remain side as a contributing factor in the Leave result.

This paper begins by delimiting blame and exploring blaming and avoiding blame in Brexit, then describes the materials used to locate contestation strategies. These represent four positions: from the Leave side, materials from the Leave.EU campaign and as written by Nigel Farage for Breitbart; Britain Stronger in Europe campaign materials; media and commentary from The Metro newspaper; and results from a survey-experiment administered amongst UK adults. It outlines the abductive approach of qualitative content analysis before going on to present the contestation strategies identified, giving examples and discussing limitations around who can and did apply each one in the Brexit campaign.

Ultimately, this paper identifies third-party blame contestation via *direct* methods (counter-blaming, rebuttal, justification, and naming and shaming blame) and indirect methods of *displacement* (credit and threats) and *changing the subjects and objects* of blame.

Introduction

What is blame?

In this paper, ‘blame’ is limited to situations where a speaker claims a party did, or has been doing, a harmful thing. The ‘speaker’ may say something out loud, in writing, or through other form of expression such as gesture (e.g. pointing at a broken vase on the floor and then at a perpetrator) or visual depiction.

Blame is also here limited to social performances of blame (Malle et al. 2014, p. 201), as when a politician blames migrants or the EU for a perceived harm, and does not include blame that happens entirely within our own minds. It is differentiated from threats that refer to harmful things in the future, credit that



Table 1 Doing good and bad to others, past and future

	Past to now	Future
Helpful (Positive)	<p>Credit <i>A speaker claims a party did, or has been doing, something helpful. E.g. “As workers, we enjoy an array of protections and benefits—every one of which was afforded to us as a direct consequence of our EU membership”.</i> (MetroTalk, 23 June 2016)</p>	<p>Promise <i>A speaker claims a party will do something helpful. E.g. “from 2014–2020, the UK will benefit from over £8.6bn from the European Social Fund and the European Regional Development Fund if we vote to remain”.</i> (Britain Stronger In Europe 2016a)</p>
Harmful (Negative)	<p>Blame <i>A speaker claims a party did, or has been doing, a harmful thing. E.g. “[the EU] has seriously damaged the fight for steel; it has cost hundreds of thousands—perhaps millions—of British jobs”.</i> (MetroTalk, 20 May 2016)</p>	<p>Threat <i>A speaker claims a party will do a harmful thing. E.g. “George Osborne makes a veiled threat to raise income tax if we vote to leave the EU”.</i> (MetroTalk, 20 April 2016)</p>

refers to helpful things in the present/past, and promises that pertain to helpful things in the future (Table 1). These each involve a claim of action, the desirability of that action, and the time frame in which this action takes place, with this division between judging actions in the past or future going back to Aristotle (1358a40-42 Aristotle 2018, p. 13). Notably, this is a focus on blame for *doing* something, rather than blame for *being* something, thus distinguishing blame from name-calling (a similar approach is taken in Sun et al. 2021). This definition of blame does not preclude the possibility of people using the word ‘blame’ to mean other things, as when people could use ‘blame for being’ in casual discussion (see also McGraw 1991, p. 1149). It likewise does not preclude non-agentic blame or threats, as when the weather might be blamed for a car crash, or Brexit itself posed as a threat that will cause harm in future.

Contestation is understood as a “social practice [that] entails objection to specific issues that matter to people” (Wiener 2014, p. 1). Here, discussion of contestation is limited to third-party contestation of blame around the Brexit campaign, and particularly where third parties contest blame of the EU. One form of contestation might be counter-blaming; for example, reading that the EU is to blame for something, and contesting that by saying it was actually somebody else’s fault. It is this process of disputing or arguing against blame that is the object of analysis.

In line with English naming norms wherein -or/-er indicates the person doing something, and -ee reflects the recipient of an action, this research uses the terminology ‘blamer’ and ‘blamee’ rather than ‘blame-maker’ and ‘blame-taker’ as found in other works on blame (Weaver 1986). The ‘blame roles’ discussed are therefore *blamer* (blaming party), *blamee* (blamed party), and *victim* (harmed party).



Background

Blame in Brexit

The Brexit referendum result has itself been blamed on economic and migratory crises (Andreouli et al. 2020; Sierz 2017; Thompson 2017; Virdee & McGeever 2018), nostalgia for an imagined past (Melhuish 2022; Saunders 2020), disinformation or foreign influence (Cervi & Carrillo-Andrade 2019; Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, 2019; Henkel 2021), underlying psychological characteristics (Garretsen et al. 2018), demographic and identity markers (Alabrese et al. 2019; Ashcroft 2019; Becker et al. 2017; Henderson et al. 2016), educational attainment (Jump & Michell 2020), and populist anti-system rhetoric (Hopkin 2017) in a political landscape increasingly populated by challenger parties (Hobolt & Tilley 2016; Vries & Hobolt 2020). In this vein, Parnell notes pro-Brexit newspapers divided “incompetent and arrogant” politicians from an “innocent, suffering” populace, and elite Remainers from ordinary Leave voters (Parnell 2021)—a divide associated with populist communication (Mudde 2004; Vasilopoulou et al. 2014). Blame is typical of such communication (Hameleers et al. 2017). With few exceptions (More in Common 2020), there has been a tendency to divide the UK population into Leavers/Remainers, seek to understand what describes each category, and learn which stories were effective for each. Leavers have been summarised as “the left-behind” (Goodwin & Heath 2016), or as “somewheres” in a globalised world of “anywheres”.

The current paper distils these narratives down to a cultural story of good (British) heroes and evil (European) villains, partly because this appears to capture their central conflict, and partly because blame could in principle contribute to, or intersect with, any of those discourses. This idea of the EU as villainous is a pro-Leave example, with the Remain campaign able to fill this narrative role with an alternative figure; the key notion is that a (good) hero rescues a (helpless) victim from a (bad) villain, while somebody who would harm another—as expressed in blame—is a villain (Lakoff 2009). A similar approach has previously been taken by Jasper et al. and by Hansson, who noted that blame can form part of a narrative frame of heroes rescuing victims from villains in the UK context (Hansson 2018; Jasper et al. 2020).

The appearance of blame in crises such as Brexit, and Brexit itself, has been noted by various authors; Lorimer highlights that the 2016 Brussels attacks were leveraged by Eurosceptic parties to blame the EU and thus make an argument for Brexit, while Vasilopoulou et al. note that fringe political parties in Greece blamed external parties including the EU during the Greek financial crisis (Lorimer 2016; Vasilopoulou et al. 2014). One pre-Brexit book examining EU-blaming found that mainstream political actors within UK government did not tend to blame the EU, either because they had buy-in to the EU, or because by blaming the EU, the opposition would be making the government look good for succeeding *in spite of* the EU (Hobolt & Tilley 2014). More recent work has considered what Brexit is or is not to blame *for*, including a slow-down in the UK’s economic recovery (Pryce 2021) and even a turn to ‘Boomer blaming’ (Bristow 2021). What is not apparent in the



literature to date is what third parties—whether campaigns, media, or public—actually did about blame during the referendum campaign, how they may have countered it, and even, how it could have been *better* countered.

Fighting back against blame

Existing work on contesting blame in politics focuses on officeholders who are themselves blaming or being blamed. It considers both how to pro-actively avoid blame, and how to minimise the fall-out from blame once allocated (e.g. Hood 2002; Weaver 1986). ‘Passing the buck’ for potentially costly decisions to somebody else so that they, instead of you, are forced to take the fall is an example of the former, while ‘circling the wagons’ by “spreading [blame] among as many policymakers as possible” is an example of the latter (Weaver 1986, p. 385).

Per Hansson (2019, p. 193), UK governmental actors helped avoid blame for the fall-out of Brexit through discursive strategies including argumentation, which incorporates claims that a harmful outcome “has been brought about either unintentionally, unknowingly, involuntarily, or by someone else”; framing/positioning—such as “representing oneself metaphorically/narratively as a Hero,... and/or representing someone else as a Villain”, or positioning oneself on the same side as the audience; denial; excluding harmful actions, victims, and potential blamees from discussion, as when policymakers and judges in Buenos Aires avoid *doing* things so they cannot be blamed for outcomes (Flom & Post 2016); legitimation including via justification (Hansson & Page 2022), with justifications working better to attenuate blame attributions than do excuses (McGraw 1991); and manipulation by biasing underlying understandings including through “discursive group polarisation”, presumably as exemplified in the us/them, good/bad, and people/elite divides common in populist rhetoric. Similar strategies have been demonstrated when politicians have *allocated* blame for Brexit in Czechia (Brusenbauch Meislová, 2021), and when UK newspapers have attempted to avoid blame for the Brexit result after the fact (Parnell 2022).

These strategies may prove helpful for individual officeholders or newspapers seeking to avoid being blamed for harmful outcomes, but do they speak to situations where the blamee is voiceless—as when the EU is absent in the present research— or when they are being defended by third-party allies or the public? Is an individual voter in the UK, by themselves, likely to be able to add or remove things from a policy agenda, or alter which politician delivers a particular piece of bad news? If not, what *can* they do? It would be condescending to suggest that officeholders speak to a placid, uncritical population—so what, in short, do people do to contest the blame they encounter?



Data and methods

To find out, Brexit was selected as a case study due to a ‘common knowledge’ that British politicians blame the EU, despite existing research suggesting this is not necessarily true (Hobolt & Tilley 2014). It is an ‘exemplifying’ case study (Bryman 2004, p. 70) not because it is exceptional—which would limit generalisability and render it unhelpful—but rather because it provides a suitable context for addressing the question of how blame is contested by those who are exposed to it: the Brexit campaign contained blame as a normal behaviour in politics (Hood 2002, p. 15), and was relatively bounded in time, language, culture, and geography.

Data from four different positions were selected and triangulated in analysis: pro-Leave campaigners (Leave.EU, Nigel Farage), pro-Remain campaigners (Britain Stronger in Europe), ostensibly neutral media (the Metro), and the public (MetroTalk and a survey-experiment). This helps reveal strategies that third parties who themselves are not blamed can use to contest blame, and the limits of those strategies. The EU did not intervene in the Brexit campaign—something then-Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker came to regret (Gotev 2019)—and so none of the materials collected and analysed here were produced by the EU.

Note that all data collection was conducted as part of a larger project that researched the vilifying effects of blame, hence the choice of a survey-experiment as method and its questions being skewed towards emotional responses.

Pre-referendum materials

Presenting full results of the ways in which pro-Leave parties blamed the EU and other parties is out of scope, though it is worth noting that Britain Stronger in Europe (‘BSE’), as the official Remain campaign, laid blame just twice in the materials analysed—both times faulting Brexit itself rather than any agent.

Pro-Leave campaign sources included texts from Leave.EU website and articles written by Nigel Farage. Vote Leave’s website as at the referendum date was peculiarly unavailable on the Internet Archive’s Wayback Machine at the time of data collection and so despite its being the official Leave campaign, pages from that site were not included in analysis. As the objective of this research is primarily to uncover ways in which blame is contested and not which Leave campaign did the most blaming, the collected materials are nevertheless considered sufficient.

For Leave.EU, “the people’s campaign” (Leave.EU, 2016a), data included all texts published on their News and Media website sections prior to 24 June 2016. The Internet Wayback Machine was used to collect data as of that day, allowing for the possibility of items being published on referendum day itself despite rules to the contrary, and ensuring articles later deleted from the Leave.EU site were included in analysis. Some texts were hosted directly and others linked to, with both types collected (excluding paywalled articles). Where a text was both linked and introduced on the site, only the full article was used. Leave.EU brochures were collected wherever possible. A total of 287 texts from Leave.EU were analysed, ranging from two paragraphs to 32 pages in length, and representing some 557 pages of analysed text.



(Note: the frequency of any contestation technique is not of primary importance, with page counts given only to indicate the breadth of materials gathered.)

All texts authored by former UKIP leader Nigel Farage for Breitbart.com were collected, given his speeches were rarely recorded. The 43 articles spanned June 2015–May 2016.

For the Remain side, BSE website articles largely replicated brochure content and images. Hence, all images, brochures, and reports published before 24 June 2016 rather than articles were collected for analysis. These are similar to the Leave.EU brochures but written from the opposing perspective. Two additional lengthy and substantive website pages, ‘Get the Facts’ and ‘What the experts say’, were collected (37 and 75 pages). A total of 25 texts comprising 164 pages were analysed.

Additionally, texts incorporating the EU or Brexit in the free newspaper “The Metro” were collected for 1 April–23 June 2016 (60 issues). It had the third-largest circulation in the UK at the time of the referendum (Tobitt & Majid 2021). Unlike the paid newspapers The Daily Mail and The Sun, each of which had higher circulations at that time, The Metro makes claims to political neutrality, including with regard to the referendum (Ponsford 2017). It was therefore selected as a relatively neutral location for observing blame and its contestation.

The Metro solicits comments on articles and publishes them in ‘MetroTalk’ in ensuing days. This meant it was possible to examine a sample of blame contestation performed by the public during the campaign as well as blame contestation appearing in articles. This is bolstered by survey-experiment data collected following the referendum as follows.

Survey-experiment

To understand how the public contest blame, a survey-experiment was administered amongst voting-age UK residents in August–December 2019. Reddit and Facebook group posts and Amazon Mechanical Turk were used to recruit participants. Cloud Research was used to ensure mTurk participants were from the UK (Litman et al. 2017).

Initially, the researcher used a snowball approach to obtain an essentially random sample. Following analysis after the first 500 results, there was a clear deficit of Leave voters, so pro-Leave subreddits and Facebook groups were targeted for further participants (convenience sampling per Bryman 2004, p. 201). Pro-Leave subreddits included /r/british, /r/brexitpartyuk, /r/tories/, /r/RightWingUK, /r/ukipparty, /r/The_Farage, /r/moggmentum, and /r/UKIP, and Facebook groups included those dedicated to Brexit, UKIP, Nigel Farage, and conservative think-tanks (e.g. the Bruges Group). Facebook group names are subject to frequent change, hence non-inclusion.

The survey-experiment collected voting preference data then showed the participant one of four vignettes, followed by these questions:

- 1. How do you feel after reading the above text?
- 1b. Why do you feel that way?



- 2. What should be done about the situation?
- 3. What could you personally do to ensure these actions are taken?
- 4. How will you feel after these actions are taken?

The vignettes were based on a Leave.EU article blaming flooding in the UK on the EU (Banks 2016), updating it with recent floods and indication the entire UK was negatively affected. The vignettes were kept similar, and blamed the EU per the original, the UK, ‘ourselves’, or did not contain any blame. Vignettes were randomly and proportionately displayed, with the no-blame vignette acting as experimental control. Any responses where questions 1–4 were not at least partially addressed were removed. The survey-experiment was released in two iterations, with only the second (450 responses) including question 1b. 1572 total responses were received, with 1368 complete.

Data processing

Data were primarily processed using qualitative content analysis (Altheide & Schneider 2017b, 2017a). This is an abductive approach (Danermark et al. 2002) that requires familiarising oneself with the context in which texts are produced (1) and with a small number of documents (2), generating codes (3), testing those codes (4), and refining them as work continues (5). It permits ideas to emerge out of data, rather than approaching data with a pre-existing set of ideas.

Such an abductive approach requires repeated readings of the same texts. Here, ‘texts’ include content produced by the campaigns, the Metro, survey-experiment participants, and visual representations, i.e. images per Stuart Hall (2003), though the focus in this latter remains on words contained in images. The first reading of each text sought broad contextual detail (1), noting general structure and keywords. The second reading was a full read-through, wherein all text in the piece was read and considered from the perspective of a ‘normal’ reader—no attempt was made to consider how any text connected to other texts (2). To begin the process of generating codes (3), the 223 texts from the ‘News’ section of Leave.EU and then 25 ‘Britain Stronger In Europe’ documents were selected for deeper review (given overlap between Leave.EU’s ‘News’ and ‘Media’ website sections, it was considered legitimate to select texts from just one of these locations). These texts were processed extensively, not looking just for blame or its contestation, for example, but manually coding *all* recurrent topics, images, topoi, motifs, and speakers using mixed methods software MaxQDA (MaxQDA 2020) over multiple reading cycles. This formed the basis of a codebook which was then tested on the other collected texts (4), with codes refined as reading went on (5). The final codebook, as it pertains to the contestation of blame, is presented in Table 2. Ultimately, all texts were read a minimum of 5–6 times to ensure appropriate depth of analysis and that all methods for contesting blame were located. This latter benefitted from understanding the context in which blame was taking place (1).

In accordance with the minimal definition given above, recognising blame requires identifying at minimum a harmful thing that has, or is, being done, and the



Table 2 Codebook

Code	Identification strategy
Blame	Identify a harmful thing (action) that has/is being done (past/present), and who did/is doing it (blamee). <i>Note: The blamee(s) present were used to generate Fig. 1</i>
Counter-blaming	A different party is blamed for the harmful action (blamee contested)
Rebuttal	The blame is described as untrue because it is not/was not done (truth of action contested)
Justification	The harmful action is justified (harmfulness of action contested)
Naming (and shaming) blame	Blame itself is explicitly discussed and (dis)allowed
Threat	Per blame, but for events in the future
Credit	Per blame, but for a helpful thing
Promise	Per credit, but for events in the future
Limiting speakers	Identify who: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • speaks in the text (e.g. Nigel Farage wrote the article; Arron Banks is quoted) • is spoken for (e.g. the public) • is spoken about (e.g. the EU, migrants)
Victim	Identify the party who suffers the harm outlaid in blame
Erasing victimhood	A victim is identified, and their victimhood is erased through: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a statement of uncaring (e.g. it does not affect me, so I do not care) • victim-blaming (e.g. they brought it on themselves) • saying others have it worse (e.g. it's worse elsewhere)
No-blaming	Identify a harmful thing that has/is being done, but where no blamee is included

blamee who did or is doing it. Threats and credit are recognised in similar ways per Table 1.

Contestation was identified as an outcome of the multiple readings and qualitative content analysis, with instances coded as they were recognised, leading to re-review of all texts, and then later grouping into three groups per the following brief overview. These contestation strategies are illustrated with examples in the following sections, alongside reflections around who can and did use each strategy in the Brexit campaign.

One genre of blame contestation so recognised is *direct*, where the blame itself is spoken about and/or engaged with—counter-blaming, rebuttal (and justification), and naming and shaming blame. This involved locating where people shifted blame to an alternative blamee, where they expressed disagreement with blame, and where ‘blame’ was talked about and *how*.

A second form of contestation focuses on blame’s complementary and opposing practices (Table 1): threat, credit, and promises. Each of these is a way of speaking about actions, their desirability, and when they are done. As such they can occupy similar discursive spaces to, and potentially displace, blame. Blame and credit have previously been discussed as opposing practices (Leong & Howlett 2017; Weaver 2018).



The third form of contestation identified was inspired by Steven Lukes' 'three faces of power' (2004), and specifically the second face, agenda-setting. This circumscribes what is legitimately sayable, and by whom. What would happen to blame if different people spoke or were spoken about? The third form of contestation is by *changing subjects and objects*, including limiting speakers, erasing victimhood, and 'no-blaming'.

Note that while identification of strategies used to contest blame takes a qualitative approach, it is bolstered by quantitative data arising from the coding process that adds meaning to the discussion—for instance, it is highlighted that 'crediting' could help contest blame, but it is rarely done by the Remain campaign. This is an example of convergent mixed methods design, whereby results are combined to "[obtain] a more complete understanding" (Creswell & Clark 2017, secs 2765–2766).

Importantly, there are several ways to count incidences of items such as blame: as the instances of blame attributed to a particular blamee, or the number of things blamed *for*. One sentence could contain multiple blamees and/or things blamed for, or blame could take place over multiple sentences—there is no perfect way to quantify it. Similar issues arise for credit and threat. Quantitising—turning qualitative data into quantifiable data as when counting instances of blame (Sandelowski et al. 2009)—is thus used to note trends only, and is supplemented by qualitative descriptions.

Egregious misspellings and typographical errors from quotations have been corrected.

Direct contestation

Counter-blaming

Counter-blaming is contesting blame by reallocating it, as in the following example:

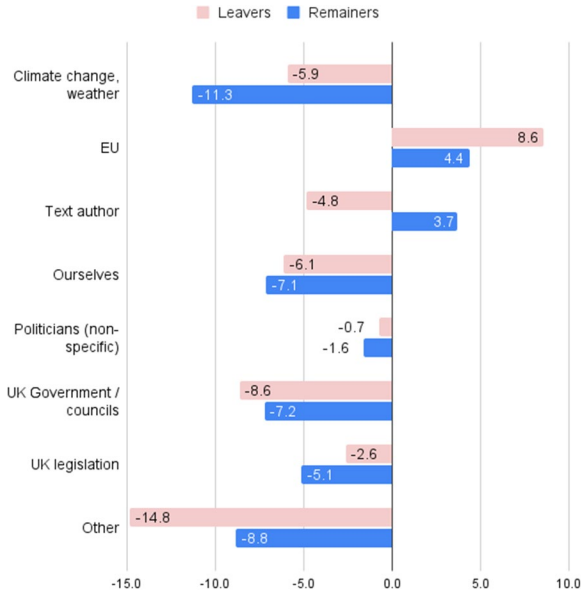
Don't blame the migrant worker for being exploited, blame the company that's exploiting them. (Yeatman 2016)

When an individual is blamed, they may be motivated to shift or counter that blame due to guilt/shame (Brown 2014; Sheikh & McNamara 2014); a politician's accepting blame could lead to lessened support. However, as indicated above, BSE's campaign was peculiarly blame-free—they did not defend the EU through redirecting blame to other parties. This prompts the question—why *would* BSE counter-blame on behalf of the EU?

BSE was competing with Leave campaigners and associated with David Cameron's Government. *If* they identified harmful—blameworthy—happenings, then their desirable blamees would be limited to the Leave campaign itself, or potentially third parties outside of Europe. Targeting Leave supporters would be attacking potential voters; targeting the EU would be counter to their argument; targeting the UK government would be targeting themselves and/or pro-Remain allies; targeting 'the



Fig. 1 Leaver and Remainer spontaneous blamee change after the EU-blame vignette compared to all vignettes



elite’ like Leave.EU would have been attacking BSE’s own message of expertise; targeting other countries in Europe may have led to diplomatic problems; and targeting other outside of Europe may have seemed irrelevant.

BSE were extraordinarily limited in their options for blamees, rendering blame—and counter-blame—unavailable to them. (This does not mean that other forms of blame management would be unavailable in the same way, as discussed below.)

Being outside the Westminster bubble, Leave. EU had more scope to blame. They could blame the EU, constituent parties, the Government itself, and adjacent parties such as an ‘elite’ per the following quotation that reflects a populist divide between the people and an elite (Mudde 2004; Roberts-Miller 2017). This suggests that exogovernmental bodies have more scope for blaming than do those who are part of government.

We aim to be funded by the ‘public’, not the *taxpayer* or *rich individuals*. / We want this to be the People’s campaign against the Political elite. (Multi-millionaire and Leave. EU founder Arron Banks; emphasis in original. Banks 2015a)

Audiences consuming blame were likewise not under the same constraints as BSE, and this meant they could—and did—provide alternative blamees. This is exemplified by responses to the EU-blaming vignette in the survey-experiment, where Leavers read the vignette and spontaneously reiterated blame of the EU more than in response to the other vignettes, while Remainers instead blamed the text author and climate change (including ‘weather’ and ‘flooding’)—each at a higher rate than for the other blame-containing vignettes. This is illustrated in Fig. 1. Numbers in the figure are calculated by deducting how often a blamee is spontaneously blamed by survey-experiment participants overall, from the occurrence of that blamee



in blame-EU responses. For example, across all vignettes, Leavers spontaneously blamed climate change for the flooding in 17.6% of responses; in the EU vignette, they blamed climate change in 11.7% of responses; thus the change is -5.9 .

Remainers read the EU-blame and *disagreed* with it, so provided alternate blamees as a form of contestation (“climate change is the culprit here not [the] EU”). They indicated that they “wouldn’t trust” the text “without further information”, and the author was treated with aspersion (“it was written by an idiot”; “Seemed like a load of shite being spouted... sets off alarms that the person writing that is nothing less than a moron”). It appears people are more likely to contest blame where they do not already agree with it, meaning ensuring people have accurate information prior to campaigns premised upon blaming is essential.

Rebuttal and justification

While Leave claims are described as untrue in five of the 16 BSE leaflets and reports analysed, they do not make much attempt to rebut *blame*. In “Top 10 rebuttals to Vote Leave claims”, two of the reiterated claims incorporate blame:

- 1: “Being in the EU makes it easier for terrorists to come to Britain”
- 2: “EU regulation costs UK businesses over £600 million every week”

To the first (1), BSE highlight *threat* twice, indicating this is one of BSE’s contestation strategies:

Those who want to pull us out of Europe and end free movement should be *careful what they wish for*.

The *real threat* is if we leave. ... The French President himself has said there would be ‘consequences’

They then credit the EU with keeping the UK safe (“We are safer in Europe...”), but refer to truthfulness when speaking of refugees/European passports rather than to the topic of terrorism:

It is untrue that refugees will be granted European passports and be allowed to come to the UK. Qualification for German citizenship, for example, takes eight years.

By not refuting the truth of the issue at hand (terrorists coming to Britain), BSE reiterate Leave arguments without clearly establishing the blame is untrue.

A similar theme appears in the second example (2), with BSE appearing to agree with the blame. They shift responsibility to the UK (“The two most expensive regulations were pushed for by the UK”), then justifying the regulations as being for good reasons including tackling climate change—a helpful outcome. This rare evidence of justification as conversion of harm to helpfulness is notably used to defray blame of the UK as ‘our side’, and does not justify measures taken by the EU. Justification, as a method for invalidating the harm component of blame and thus rebutting the blame itself, did not otherwise appear in BSE content. (It is possible to



imagine the reverse situation, where no possible benefit is worth the harm incurred, converting helpfulness to harm.)

Next, BSE argue that the UK does not pay very much, after all (“the actual regulatory burden ... is remarkably low”); and that the UK is both competitive and under-regulated. That is, even where BSE explicitly attempt to rebut Leave arguments, they reiterate them, agree with them, and at worst claim the UK is responsible—and there, justification converts harm into helpfulness. Such hedging and ambiguity has likewise been found by Buckledee vis-à-vis the Remain campaign (Buckledee 2018). Refutation of blame is not apparent in Metro articles featuring pro-Remain politicians.

Rebuttal *is* apparent in survey-experiment responses, particularly for the blame-EU vignette (“Blaming EU directives is beyond ridiculous”). Several Leavers rebutted the EU-blaming, though one went on to spontaneously blame the EU for another issue. In contrast, several Remainers rebutted the blame by *crediting* the EU for the regulations described as problematic in the vignette, or by describing the EU as the answer to the problem:

Implement more extensive flood prevention and mitigation procedures—if anything, the Floods Directive should have led to procedures that have already mitigated the impacts of these events

Make sure you follow the directives set out by the EU, which do allow for dredging with consideration for the environment.

Generally, and at least some of the time, people spontaneously contested blame via rebuttal where they disagreed with it, noting that survey-experiment participants were not asked to judge the truth/falseness of the vignettes. This indicates the key role of existing knowledge where blame is concerned. It also seems likely that knowledge is essential to justification, as without nuanced information, it would be difficult to argue in favour of an otherwise harmful thing.

It is not clear why the public as exemplified in survey-experiment responses rebutted blame more coherently than did BSE. It could be that BSE saw Leave’s claims as having basis in fact; or perhaps it was undesirable to repeat fraudulent claims, even in rebutting them, in case they reached a larger audience. If so, it is not clear that BSE could have successfully contested blame through rebuttal or justification.

Naming and shaming blame

Blaming itself appears to be frowned-upon, with actors either claiming they are not performing this unacceptable behaviour, or having others call them out for blaming:

And for those who think we’re blaming the pitch, we’re not. (Farage 2015c)

Loose talk of a Brexit of Mass Destruction is a painfully transparent exercise i[n] buck-passing (Leave.EU, 2016c)



One MetroTalk commenter suggests that once the UK leaves the EU, “We’ll just continue to have the same problems but no longer be able to blame anyone but ourselves” (6 June 2016). A similar sentiment appears in survey-experiment responses, with blaming portrayed as unhelpful:

blaming the EU or the Gov will not get you anywhere... if there was less finger pointing maybe people [could] come together to help people

Conversely, blaming is sanctioned where victims are involved (though previous work suggests blame distracts people from victims: Jane 2016; Resodihardjo 2020):

The blame lies at the EU’s door because the UK authorities have no right to put in place a system that discriminates against EU drivers from outside the UK. (Kimber 2016)

Rhetorical questions are occasionally used to leverage existing victimisation to render a party faultless—“who can blame them?” conveys the message that “these parties should not be blamed”:

Indeed given Greece’s current financial plight, who can blame them for wanting to see these people leave their already impoverished country? (Farage 2015b)

[The public] want our so-called renegotiation to focus on the free movement of people and given the situation in Calais, who can blame them? (Farage 2015a)

BSE did not employ the strategy of naming and shaming blame from the Leave side. It is possible that acknowledging that harmful things had happened—but that blaming or taking away the EU would not also take away the ‘bad’—could have helped BSE re-focus on the underlying situation (May 2022); the shaming of blame may then have played in Remain’s favour. The effect on politicians’ support when those politicians practice unacceptable blaming needs further research.

Displacement of blame

This section illustrates practices that occupy similar spaces to blame, but with different outcome and temporal focuses.

Credit was virtually absent in survey-experiment responses, other than when used in combination with rebuttal as indicated above. Meanwhile, per Fig. 2, BSE credited more frequently than pro-Leave parties; typically, the EU was the ‘creditee’.

It is understandable that BSE would credit the EU, given they were arguing to remain and thus would point out helpful things it does. Notwithstanding this positivity, there was occasionally some ambivalence—despite doing good things, the EU was not perfect.

Europe is far from perfect. But it has given us the most progressive employment legislation in the country bar none. (Britain Stronger In Europe 2016d)



Fig. 2 Percentage of pre-referendum texts containing credit

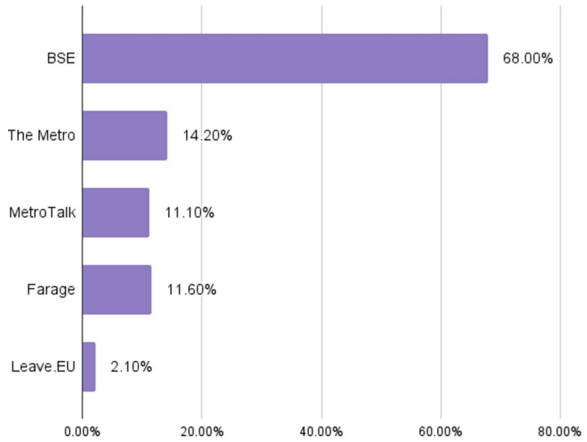


Fig. 3 Using nostalgic imagery to depict leaving the EU as a war (Leave.EU 2016b)



Credit was also claimed *from* the EU, with BSE painting the UK as ultimately responsible for several EU initiatives:

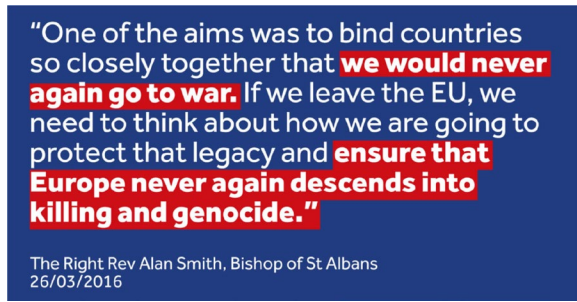
Thanks partly to pressure from the UK, the EU is extending the Single Market to new fields (Britain Stronger In Europe 2016b)

By depicting the UK as powerful enough to influence the EU, BSE not only takes credit from the EU and its consensus-based approach, but perhaps even feeds into Leave discourses of British exceptionalism that would permit the UK to easily survive leaving the EU.

BSE could have made more effective use of credit, as previously noted by authors including Goes (2016) and Goodwin et al (2020, p. 493). Pro-Leave campaigns frequently referred to the past, whether World War 2 (Fig. 3) or a perceived imperial glory age, and were therefore able to speak of the UK as *worse off* over time thanks to the EU. Consider the historicism in the following quotations (emphases added):



Fig. 4 The EU as an anti-war project (Britain Stronger In Europe, n.d.)



This... is why this referendum must see all come together to fight for our country and our democracy. After all, that is what so many in *two World Wars* sacrificed their lives to protect. (Farage 2016)

Remember, remember the *5th of November*, gunpowder, treason and plot. As Brussels is burning, the tide is now turning, the EU continues to rot! ... I wonder what plot *Guy Fawkes* would have planned for the EU? (Banks 2015b)

This historicism was not typically apparent in the BSE campaign. They spoke of *current* regulations, *current* opportunities, and projections of what may happen in *future*, but did not credit historical long-term improvements to membership of the EU. One moment of historicised credit relates only to the past decade, and the EU is absent from the paragraph (“Over the past decade we have benefitted from investment of £24bn a year on average, which is over £66 m per day” (Britain Stronger In Europe 2016b)). BSE uses one image to claim that the EU was designed to prevent war, though focuses on the *threat* of war should the UK leave, rather than crediting the EU for peace (Fig. 4).

It could be that the Remain campaign did not perceive accrued benefits over time as a possible argument for remaining in the EU, though that would raise the question why there was a Remain campaign at all. It is also possible that this was simply not included in the public campaign materials analysed, but again, it is not clear why this would be the case.

Thus, while BSE does credit the EU for current initiatives, this is undermined through couching it in ambivalence and claiming credit from the EU. It is also not clear that credit can be as effective as blame, given human negativity bias means negative information has more weight. It is still quite remarkable that a campaign advocating *for* something so infrequently credited it with *accomplishing* anything over past decades.

BSE also used *threat* as a negative tool, with a large part of the campaign’s message boiling down to fear or uncertainty associated with the ‘leap into the unknown’ of leaving—hence their colloquial name, ‘Project Fear’. The BSE poster in Fig. 5 depicts the threat of leaving, using the words “don’t risk it” against an image of a woman dressed in the white of the innocent anxiously peering from an unknown height into the dark below.



Fig. 5 BSE campaign poster



Table 3 Now and the future, for the Leave and Remain campaigns

	Now, within the EU	Future outside the EU
Leave campaign	Blame; certainty of bad things done now and for many years	Promise; possibility of good things to come. Substantiated through references to illustrious past
Remain campaign	Some uncertain credit	Threat; possibility of bad things to come

As noted in the section on rebuttal, BSE used threat to displace and contest blame.

This is the opposite of the Leave campaign. Whereas Leavers claimed that things were bad now (blame) and would be good once the UK had left (promise), the Remain campaign argued that things were *somewhat* good now (credit) and could be bad if the UK left (threat).

There is a clear asymmetry in that Leave’s blame ‘now’ is certain, with Remain’s credit hedged; the future for Leave will certainly be bright outside of the EU as demonstrated by an exceptional/illustrious past, whereas for Remain, things *might* be bad if they left. This asymmetry is depicted in Table 3.

In a battle between BSE’s credit and threat versus the Leave campaign’s blame and promises of greatness, BSE seem certain to lose—not simply due to human negativity bias, but because they were ambiguous about the credit they gave. It is possible to envisage a situation in which realistic threats lead to vilification; it is though unclear whether the concept of Brexit itself—a non-agentic, faceless phenomenon—could have been a more substantial villain for BSE’s purposes than the EU was for the Leave campaign. Intensified credit-giving, perhaps embedded in a sense of historicism to avoid detracting from the present UK Government, may have been a more promising plane upon which BSE could have contested blame.

Changing subjects and objects

Limiting who speaks

Leave.EU consistently called itself the grassroots/people's campaign, also showing images of UK workers and including a 'messenger' series on its website where regular people could have their views published.

This was not apparent in the BSE materials analysed, with limited images of UK workers, and no references to representation of the 'grassroots' or 'public' (compared to 14% of Farage's texts and 24% of Leave.EU's). The BSE campaign instead referred consistently and explicitly to expertise. Rather than speaking 'on behalf of' the grassroots as did Leave.EU, BSE treated the people as objects; they were *telling* the people rather than acting with and for them. For example, "UK families are better off Being in Europe makes your family stronger" (Britain Stronger In Europe 2016c)—it is not about 'we', 'us', and 'our', but rather 'your' family. There is a separation between the experts providing advice, and the people they are speaking to.

This means that if the people of the UK had indeed been victimised by the things the EU had done to them—as captured via blame—the Remain campaigners were not part of those victims. Conversely, pro-Leave campaigns could posit themselves as victims' champions—heroes—as they were suffering alongside the people of the UK but had the strength to overcome the villain on behalf of all.

The Leave.EU and BSE campaigns were united in one striking way: they did not give the perspective of the EU. Despite crediting the EU, and moreover blaming it, the EU's voice—for example, quoting EU personnel or materials—is absent from the pre-referendum campaign materials and Metro alike. This may be partly because the EU is not a single person with a single voice, and potentially because participation would be inappropriate for what is ostensibly a domestic decision. However, the EU's absence had several implications for its being blamed during the Brexit campaign:

1. The EU could not take credit on its own behalf. On 2 June 2016, there was a double page Metro spread discussing the removal of mobile roaming charges in the EU. This is an EU initiative, but it was not credited—instead, the focus was on local mobile carriers. BSE did occasionally mention the removal of roaming charges as a reason to stay in the EU; no other party credited it to the EU. Credit of the EU, by the EU, was unavailable as a strategy by which to displace Leavers' blame.
2. The EU could not defend itself from blame. As such, it could be expected that blame was 'stickier' (Hood 2002); unlike domestic politicians or other actors, there's no EU voice arguing back through denial, framing, or other strategies as outlined by Hansson and others (Hansson 2015; Hood 2002; Weaver 1986). This may make the EU—and voiceless bodies such as migrants—an ideal blamee.

Overall, the EU may be a desirable blamee in that it cannot counter-blame on a domestic level (blaming specific national politicians or initiatives would be



impolitic); this points to a deep need for proactive communications from the EU claiming credit for the activities it undertakes, in addition to information about how the EU works and may be 'held accountable' so that there are options beyond simply leave/remain. Through not including the EU in the conversation, an avenue for contestation of blame was removed.

Other objects of blame that did not 'speak' included migrants (variously vilified and victimised), and southern Europeans who were commonly rendered victims of the EU. Such groups became useful *objects* for blame, rather than subjects, perhaps suggesting that their victimisation does not matter other than as a politically expedient tool. This points to blame's role in obscuring the needs of victims and structural deficiencies alike, in the name of pursuing a blamee.

Erasing victimhood

While victims are spontaneously identified in the survey-experiment, their victimhood—and perhaps the compassion it demands (Lerner & Simmons 1966)—is also pro-actively erased. This is illustrated in the examples below, where participants say that the situation does not affect them and so they do not care (1, 2), or victim-blame (3), or suggest that others have it worse (4).

1: "My area does not suffer from flooding, so indifferent"

2: "Nothing, it does not affect me"

3: "Neutral. It doesn't make a significant difference to me and people choosing to buy homes near flood plains are deciding upon that risk for themselves"

4: "Doesn't feel too close to home and it's worse in other countries"

Victim erasure could reflect dismissal of the situation, and therefore the blame; it could equally indicate apathy or unwillingness to be involved. It becomes an excuse to not care about a situation, in doing so erasing the victims and the harm done to them. This might lead to less or fewer negative feelings towards apparent perpetrators (c.f. Pfattheicher et al. 2019) but at the same time, would not help redress underlying problems. As such it is not clear that erasing victimhood would have been a productive strategy for BSE to contest blame, or consistent with any form of politics where compassion for (some) victims is required.

No-blame

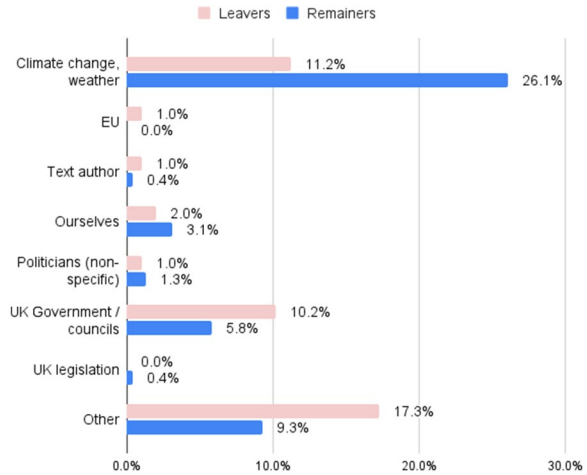
Acknowledging a harmful act without attributing it to a specific party appears across pre-referendum materials. This relies on the passive voice and focuses on the harm outlined in blame rather than any perpetrator.

In Metro articles, use of the passive to 'no blame' followed a headline that provided the blamee, for example:

Many parents are set to be disappointed today when their children are rejected for their school of choice, a minister warns.



Fig. 6 Percentage of no-blame vignette responses containing blamee, by voting preference



Headline: Children miss out on school places ‘because of Europe’ (18 April 2016)

The passive often appears where the speaker is searching for a blamee (“can this really be the fault of part-time, lifelong anglers like myself?” (Farage 2015d)), and also where naming the perpetrator is less important than the victim. This is apparent in MetroTalk comments about the assassination of pro-European MP Jo Cox:

It’s extremely sad that a life like hers is cruelly cut short in such a way.

That poor woman going about her work and cut down in the prime of life (both 20 June 2016)

A clue as to the effects of this ‘no-blaming’ can be gleaned from no-blame survey-experiment results, where a harmful thing and victims were described, but no perpetrator. Per Fig. 6, people spontaneously produced blame after reading this vignette. Even where there is no blamee given, people spontaneously blame or search for a perpetrator anyway.

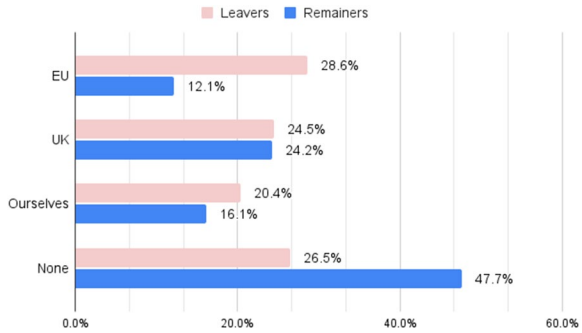
Per Fig. 6, there were some differences in whom Leavers and Remainers blamed, which presumably relates to the parties already in their ‘blaming niche’ as a result of discourses to which they have been variously subjected. Remainers were more likely to blame the non-agent of ‘climate change’, which is interesting in light of research that suggests that more conservative audiences (like Leavers) in the US tend to attribute outcomes to purposeful actions such as those of an actor and not of non-agentic parties (Nowlan & Zane 2022).

Additionally, Remainers identified victims significantly more after reading the no-blame vignette, though there appears to have been little difference for Leavers (Fig. 7).

Our brains are predictive, meaning we are more likely to see what we expect to see, and our predictions are informed by context (such that one might expect Farage to blame the EU) (Barrett 2017). This suggests that not explicitly stating a blamee



Fig. 7 Percentage of responses containing a victim, by blame vignette and voting preference



could lead people to ‘fill in the blank’ with their own expected, or an implied, blamee, while the speaker can avoid criticism for lying or charges of slander. Differences between Leavers and Remainers per Fig. 6 suggest this does take place, with people spontaneously producing blame in accordance with existing beliefs. ‘No blaming’ may thereby help entrench existing ideas of and feelings towards perpetrators—despite those perpetrators being unnamed.

Conversely, where a perpetrator is absent, perhaps it becomes easier to focus on victims’ needs and correct underlying situations, in which case no-blaming could defang blame and lead to better outcomes for those affected. This would be a worthy area for further research, particularly given the difference between Leavers and Remainers in the current study.

Conclusion

This paper has identified and discussed several methods used to contest blame in the specific case of the Brexit campaign. Direct contestation methods include counter-blaming, rebuttal and justification, and naming and shaming blame; indirect methods include displacement by crediting and making threats, and changing subjects and objects as exemplified by limiting speakers, erasing victimhood, and no-blaming. BSE’s campaign shortcomings vis-a-vis blame were identified; particularly, they were limited in who they themselves could blame to defray blaming of the EU, did not rebut blame, made only ambiguous and ahistoric claims of credit, and positioned certain blame now against an uncertain threatening future. The EU’s perspective was absent, meaning it could not take credit nor defend itself from blame.

Overall, the Leave campaign had an excellent blamee in the form of the EU, whereas the Remain campaign struggled to contest this through creation of an alternate villain or, indeed, a hero. It is perhaps not surprising that the Leave campaign was successful, with BSE failing to mitigate blame and the EU failing to defend itself.

These findings add to existing literature by stressing the different limitations around performing blame that are experienced by third parties such as exogovernmental challenger parties (Vries & Hobolt 2020). The location of Leave.EU outside



government meant greatly improved scope for blaming of the EU and government alike, without personal consequences (c.f. Weaver 2018, pp. 270–271).

Moreover, existing work focuses on blame avoidance by individual officeholders, when they are the ones being blamed; the EU was voiceless in even the pro-EU Remain campaign materials analysed, and thus could not participate in such avoidance structures. This paper therefore adds to blame contestation literature by focusing on what third-party campaigns and individuals alike can and actually do to contest—and potentially mitigate the effects of—blame, beyond an individual’s simply moving the blame elsewhere or avoiding situations in which they could be blamed. It understands audiences and blamers alike as active participants in practicing blame and contestation thereof and illustrates the particular issue of having blamees and victims as objects rather than subjects of blame. This latter is likely to continue to be problematic for the EU, which does not tend to participate in ‘domestic’ affairs.

Further research could identify additional ways to contest blame, given the present research focussed on just those strategies present in texts relating to one campaign and one country. To this end, blame contestation as a potential source of mitigation should be investigated in other cultures, countries, and languages, including languages where the passive voice is used to explain harmful events. The specific effects of contestation might also be tested, to find out to what *extent* contestation strategies mitigate blame.

Data availability statement The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, LM, upon reasonable request.

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