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Claiming credit and avoiding blame: political accountability in Greek and Turkish responses to the COVID-19 crisis

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Abstract

Using a framework developed by Hood and adapting it to crises, we explore the factors behind the use of three types of political accountability strategies— presentational, policy, and agency—during responses to the COVID-19 crisis in Greece and Turkey. We situate the comparison in the current political context and conclude with implications for political survival as leaders attempt to balance public accountability, political expediency, and national health.

KEYWORDS

accountability, blame avoidance, COVID-19 crisis, credit claiming, Greece, Turkey

1 | INTRODUCTION

In this article, we focus on political accountability by comparing the Greek and Turkish national responses to the COVID-19 crisis. The study is underpinned by the assumption that the overarching objective of all leaders is re-election (Mayhew, 2004). Policymakers' failure to tackle the crisis may not only have devastating consequences for the lives and well-being of citizens, but also for their prospects for re-election (Boin, 't Hart, Stern, & Sundelius, 2017; Brändström, 2016). Conversely, success involves making decisions that accomplish political goals, minimize loss of life and/or property, and attract *"near universal"* support (McConnell, 2011, 68). We employ the classification of strategies—agency, presentational, and policy—developed by Hood (2011) to understand how and why governments avoid blame and take credit.

Rather than uncovering causal relationships, the aim of our two-country comparison contrasts contexts in order to understand how crisis accountability played out in each context. This interpretive

dimension in social sciences is accommodated within small-N comparative studies as elaborated in Skocpol and Somers (1980) by asking the same or similar analytical questions in contrasting contexts which may highlight divergences, thus making them more transparent. We chose Greece and Turkey because the two neighbors adopted similar measures even though political institutions and accountability processes are quite different. Greece is an EU parliamentary democracy with a relatively new government (having been first elected in July 2019) and strong political opposition at the time of the COVID-19 crisis. In contrast, Turkey is a non-EU presidential democracy with authoritarian tendencies and relatively weaker political opposition. This article is underpinned by the question of whether two different governments may adopt similar measures and achieve somewhat similar levels of accountability.

2 | BLAME AVOIDANCE, CREDIT-CLAIMING, AND POLITICAL EXPEDIENCY

While accounting for one's actions in the aftermath of a crisis contains several salient dimensions such as lesson-drawing (see also Petridou, Zahariadis, & Ceccoli, 2020 [this issue]), in this article we assess whether leaders and agencies acted swiftly, adequately, and correctly (Brändström, 2016). The practical question to ask is whether leaders were transparent and constructive in presenting an account of what they did prior to and during the crisis (Boin, Kuipers, & Overdijk, 2013). We focus on the strategies that officeholders used as political maneuvers to entangle in, or extricate themselves from, consequences imposed on them by the crisis (McGraw, 1991).

Credit-claiming broadly refers to attributing a decision to an office holder for political gain, while blame avoidance focuses on minimizing losses (Mayhew, 2004; Hood, 2011; Twight, 1991). In a seminal article, Weaver (1986) posited the negativity bias phenomenon, which states that blame avoidance, rather than credit-claiming, motivates political actions because losses matter more than gains. As prospect theorists have demonstrated, people hate to lose more than they like to win (Tversky & Kahneman, 1981). In political terms, loss of votes or popular support does more damage and lingers longer than any equivalent gains. To that end, politicians engage in blame risk management by attempting to skirt any perceived responsibility, loss, or harm that would result in them being blamed for their chosen course of action.

2.1 | Aims and Strategies

To hold one accountable necessitates pinpointing responsibility. For this reason, policymakers routinely engage in blame avoidance and credit-claiming strategies to minimize losses and maximize benefits. This is particularly complicated in times of transboundary crises that involve high levels of uncertainty, ambiguity, urgency, and turbulence (Boin, 2019). Social anxiety and political tension caused by health crises, such as the one caused by COVID-19, require a repertoire of both kinds of strategies, carefully constructed and implemented in compressed time frames. We view blame avoidance and credit-claiming as organically linked and as opposite poles of the same continuum (Twight, 1991).

Hood (2011) offers a useful taxonomy of blame avoidance strategies at the agency, presentation, and policy levels, which we employ to cover the entire continuum between credit-claiming and blame avoidance. *Agency* strategies involve the refraction of blame through a complex and fuzzy institutional architecture. Office holders would tend to delegate decisions that are likely to attract blame while

retaining those they perceive as resulting in credit earning. Blame may be diffused through partnerships and multi-agency arrangements, bureaucratic reform, or reshuffling. In a sense, it is the process of assigning a scapegoat (Hood, 2007, 2011). *Presentation* strategies are based on issue framing and on *"trying to avoid blame by spin, stage management, and argument"* (Hood, 2011:17). They involve the construction of narratives that cast incumbent officeholders in the best light possible to the public for the explicit purpose of limiting or avoiding blame (Hood, 2007). *Policy* strategies focus on decision making processes and the substance of what policymakers do, rather than structural governmental arrangements. Officeholders choose policies that would limit exposure to blame through favoring formula-based decisions (rather than those based on independent judgment), making decisions in groups as a means to diffuse responsibility, or by reducing the scope of a policy in order to avoid exposure to blame (Hood, 2011).

Of course, politicians use a combination of the above strategies. The aim is to create a distance from, or to link themselves to, the outcomes. Agency strategies are much easier to accomplish because they involve delegation or the deflection of responsibility. Presentational strategies are considerably easier to control because they are choreographed. This is especially true during crises when information costs (to the public) are high, communication is centrally managed, and decisions are justified in terms of "saving lives." Policy strategies are more difficult and more salient from a political perspective because they facilitate the allocation of credit and responsibility, respectively. Here, policy narratives play a useful role in controlling the flow of information and in justifying specific implementation plans to voters. We begin the analysis when COVID-19 cases were first reported in Europe in January 2020 and end it in mid-May 2020 when containment measures were relaxed to start the (presumptive) recovery process.

3 | THE GREEK RESPONSE

Greek policymakers quickly understood from the Chinese experience that COVID-19 was highly contagious and lethal, but the Italian case truly alarmed them. Between February 23rd and 27th, Italy confirmed three times as many new cases while the number of recorded deaths from COVID-19 shot from one to 15 as the pandemic was fast becoming a serious crisis with seismic public health and political consequences (see Malandrino, 2020 [this issue]). Meanwhile, following ten years of economic austerity and five years of a concurrent migration crisis, the Greek national health system had found its budget cut by three-quarters and the number of intensive care beds standing at a mere 560 (Psaropoulos, 2020). Although there was no confirmed case in Greece at that time, the government realized it could not afford a pandemic experience of Italy's magnitude. It did not have the institutional capacity or the resources to handle a significant volume of patients and had to be proactive, focusing on prevention, not treatment. As Professor Elias Mossialos, adviser to the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Greek government on the COVID-19 pandemic, said, *"had Greece not recognised its vulnerability and taken early and decisive action, it might be facing a very different situation today"* (Hayes, 2020). Moreover, the governing New Democracy Party sought to distance itself from its predecessor, SYRIZA, who paid a dear price at the ballot box in 2019 for mishandling the response to the devastating 2018 wildfires and was eager to revamp its tarnished reputation to allies and potential investors. As the prime minister's economics adviser, Alex Patelis, claims: *"We want to show that Greece is a serious country…[A]nd we want to get past being labelled as the black sheep of Europe"* (quoted in Psaropoulos, 2020). Thus, the government's response to COVID-19 was colored in part by the recognition of its inadequacies and limitations and by the desire to overcome them.

After extensive contact tracing, it was decided to cancel the annual carnival in Patra (an event which draws big crowds from all over the country) on February 27th. Social disruption led to push-back by the political opposition and some individuals. However, as the number of confirmed cases began to climb, all educational institutions across the country were closed on March 10th. On March 12th, movie theaters, gyms, and courtrooms were closed. On March 13th, with 190 confirmed cases and a single death, malls, cafés, restaurants, bars, beauty parlors, museums, and archaeological sites were ordered to shut followed by beaches and ski resorts the next day. On the same day, flights to and from Italy were banned. The most impactful measures came on March 23rd, when, following directives by other EU member states, the government banned all non-essential travel and imposed restriction of movement nationwide. Subject to heavy fines, citizens could leave their homes only with special permits and for specific reasons. The government gradually began easing these measures beginning on May 4th, with the intent of returning to normalcy by mid-June.

Crises have political implications, and Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis knew he would have to account for his actions. *"I knew from the very beginning that if something needed to be done, it was best to do it earlier rather than later… We took our first decisions even before we had the first confirmed case,"* he told a teleconference with the Brookings Institution (Kathimerini, 2020). In the low-trust, adversarial Greek polity, fingers would soon be pointed and blame games were sure to follow. Therefore, a variety of accountability strategies were used to construct a political spectacle (Edelman, 1988) with a narrative that would insulate the government should things go wrong and that would surround it if they went right.

Consistent with Hood's (2011) taxonomy, agency strategies were devised to delegate responsibility to experts. Although the Health Ministry maintains standing advisory committees on infectious diseases, on February 23rd it created a new national committee of public health protection related to COVID-19 that was charged with designing a range of prevention and protection measures above and beyond those already recommended by the WHO and European Union (EU) health guidelines. While the ostensible goal was to save lives, Prime Minister Mitsotakis admitted that he was aiming to regain the trust of citizens. But doing so also helped him avoid blame by presenting experts as the makers of policy. If they succeeded in slowing down the spread of the disease, he could easily step in to claim credit. If they failed, he could hold them accountable for not making the right choices (see Colfer, 2020 [this issue]). As it turns out, they succeeded. Accordingly, he used their success to improve the public's perception of his leadership's positive valence (Stone, 2017), enhancing his reputation as a strong leader (Busuioc & Lodge, 2016). *"It was obvious we were moving toward some form of lockdown and I made the decision to do it early,"* Mitsotakis admitted (Kathimerini, 2020; emphasis added).

Presentation was left to others. As part of its strategy, the government began daily television broadcasts in March about the situation. Briefings were left to Dr. Sotirios Tsiodras, spokesperson for the Ministry of Health and a professor of infectious diseases at the University of Athens. He was accompanied by a politician or a civil servant. This person was often Nikos Hardalias, Deputy Minister for Civil Protection and Crisis Management. Consistent with 't Hart's argument (1993) on the symbolic dimensions of crisis management and accountability, the purpose of the briefings was to inform but also reassure the public that the government had control of the situation. The briefings explained the warnings and measures issued by the Ministry of Health about the need to adopt harsh measures early in order to save lives, even if they had adverse economic consequences. Avoiding political blame, it conveyed the message that doctors, not politicians, advised them. At the same time, the presence of a politician or a civil servant claimed credit for the government by injecting a political dimension. The staging process was well thought out and executed. Even the foreign media reported that Tsiodras conducted the briefings with humility and compassion (e.g. Labropoulou, 2020). Aspects of his personal

life were selectively leaked to the press; he was the father of seven children and a devout member of his neighborhood church community (RFI, 2020). This spoke to ordinary Greeks and placated the politically powerful Greek Orthodox Church at a time when the measures forbade public services in churches during Easter to slow down the spread of the virus.

At a policy level, some Greeks engaged in credit-claiming. Prime Minister Mitsotakis was up-front and direct: His message was that he acted as he did to save lives. Looking at Italy as an example of the disaster the crisis could evolve into, he stated: *"In Italy unfortunately, one person is lost every two minutes…we have to protect the common good, our health"* (quoted in Perrigo & Hincks, 2020). Drawing lessons once the country was on its way to recovery, he took credit for the low numbers of cases and deaths*: "I will begin with a comment by General Allen that the USA turns to Greece for 'best practices and inspiration'. Think about it and, within the context of what happened in Greece the last 10 years, how likely is it that you would use this phrase about Greece 6 or 12 months, two or three years ago… I am particularly proud that we have managed to change the country's image"* (Kathimerini, 2020). Consistent with credit-claiming (Mayhew, 2004), Mitsotakis clearly took credit but also steered blame to his predecessor, hoping to boost his re-election chances.

Accountability is a contest of explanations (Boin et al., 2017) in that political pressure is exerted on leaders to explain and account for any failures. Given the contagious nature of the pandemic, the lack of resources, and the inability to predict outcomes, the Greek government decided on transparency as the best blame-limiting strategy. Political tension rises in crises when political actors frame events or actions as blameworthy violations of important public values (Brändström & Kuipers, 2003). One of the fundamental values in democratic systems is the open and free flow of ideas as the normative doctrine of good governance (Hood, 2007). In the Greek case, transparency was used as a tool of blame-limiting. If the government proactively makes all the information public in terms of cases, deaths, mortality rates, etc., then political blame may be limited. Accountability was limited in the sense that due process was followed and decisions were made and openly rationalized. Flaws, mistakes, or disasters may be attributed to bad luck or inherent limitations to our knowledge base. Voters are far more forgiving in the ballot box when responsibility is shared. Indeed, this is the deeper meaning behind Tsiodras' exhortation against rising political tension: *"I want to believe the pandemic is a victory…The opportunity should not be turned into an opportunity for political tension… Everything should be done with transparency, ethical motives, and using strict regulatory rules"* (NPHO, 2020). Unlike the Swine Flu pandemic in 2009–2010 (Versluis, van Asselt, & Kim, 2019), it was deference to the experts, the depoliticization of the response, and blame-limiting through transparency that convinced the public to comply with very stringent measures. In an opinion poll by Metron Analysis (2020) on April 22–28, 87 percent of those asked had a favorable opinion of the government's handling of the crisis, and other opinion polls showed similar levels of public support. Based on the twin objectives of saving lives and high public favorability, we find a preliminary, at least, success of the government's strategies.

4 | THE TURKISH RESPONSE

Similar to Greece, Turkey took precautionary measures before the virus hit. Figure 1 outlines the timeline of measures in both countries. It also shows that Turkey reported confirmed cases after Greece and consequently adopted measures later. On January 14th, the newly formed Coronavirus Scientific Advisory Board (SAB) prepared information to the public in a COVID-19 Disease Guide. Screening procedures with thermal cameras were established for passengers entering the country from China and Southeast Asian countries and were later extended to all arrivals. Turkey halted flights to and from

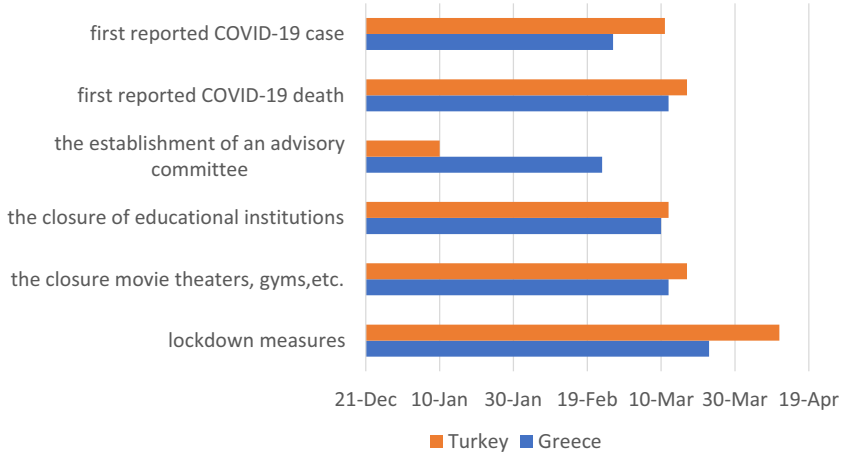

FIGURE 1 Greek and Turkish Responses to the COVID-19 Crisis

China, Iran, Italy, Iraq, and South Korea and closed land border crossings with Iran and Iraq. As part of precautionary measures, some public places and mass transit vehicles were routinely disinfected.

The Health Minister, Fahrettin Koca, announced the first COVID-19 case in the country on March 11th, after a Turkish national who returned from Europe tested positive. Thereafter, COVID-19 cases exponentially increased, reaching a peak on April 23rd of 80,808 active cases (Worldometer, 2020). Immediately after the first reported case, Turkey ramped up measures to protect against the virus. These measures included quarantine rules for all incoming passengers; a moratorium on international travel for civil servants; the shutting down schools and universities, cafés, theaters, and gyms, and a ban on large congregations, including at sports events and mosques. Turkey imposed partial curfew on the elderly, young people, and those with chronic diseases. Additionally, stricter measures ranged from the restrictions of inter-city travel to the suspension of all international flights in the last week of March. In consideration of economic consequences, the government initially hesitated to impose a mandatory lockdown. However, it reversed its position after a spike in confirmed cases. The 48-hour lockdown was first imposed on April 11th and continued intermittently until June 1st. Lockdown measures coincided with exponential increases in the number of deaths starting in late March (Worldometer, 2020).

The SAB played a crucial role throughout the crisis period by outlining policy recommendations and by informing the public. Measures that ranged from the termination of international flights to designating pandemic hospitals to testing for the and treating COVID-19 patients were all taken in line with SAB's advice (Sayin, 2020). Reliance on expert opinion offers policymakers dual advantages: Firstly, it enables them to make well-informed decisions, and secondly, it enables them to minimize political risks by avoiding blame (Hood, 2011). In this context, the establishment of the SAB can be seen as an agency strategy aimed at reducing the burden of costly decisions through the formation of organizational architecture. The very creation of the board sent a message that the issue was beyond the policymakers' knowledge and expertise and that policymakers were striving to respond adequately to the crisis by relying on expert judgment. In this respect, it was a blame avoidance strategy at the agency level geared toward depoliticizing the issue and responsibility sharing.

Measures such as the imposition of lockdown, restrictions placed on certain age groups, and "stay home messages" from the government were typical examples of government responsiveness in light of the COVID-19 crisis. They were policy strategies that aimed at reducing the chances of blame by laying out new procedures (Hood, 2011). The adoption of these measures and rules enabled policymakers

to allocate responsibility to individuals when it came to the prevention of the spread of the disease. Erdogan's statement *"[t]hose who go out without for unnecessarily reasons, those who create unnecessary crowds on the street, feed the virus with their own hands"* (Turk, 2020) and his repeated calls to citizens to observe their *"own state of emergency"* (Fraser & Wieting, 2020) are poignant examples of the allocation of responsibility to individuals.

The announcement of lockdown a few hours before its implementation on April 10th led many people to flock to markets creating ideal conditions for spreading the virus. As mentioned above, lockdown measures are policy strategies in the fight against the outbreak. Yet, the timing of the Interior Minister's, (Suleyman Soylu) announcement received harsh public criticism. It was also severely criticized by political figures from opposition parties stressing the state authorities' shortsightedness and incompetence with respect to crisis management (Euronews, 2020). In response to these criticisms, Soylu took the blame by acknowledging the inadvertent consequences of his decision and announced his resignation on 12th April (which was rejected by President Erdogan).

While the creation of the SAB and the prohibitive measures were blame avoidance strategies (agency and policy respectively) adopted in anticipation of blame risk, Soylu's attempted resignation was a presentational blame-limiting strategy. As underlined by Hood (2011, 52), *"[w]hile excuses are commonly used at the frontline level, they can sometimes be crucial for warding off blame at the higher level…"*. In this respect, while Soylu's acknowledgement of the inadvertent consequences of the announcement is a poor political excuse, his initial blame-taking and Erdogan's subsequent refusal of his resignation can be considered as a successful blame avoidance for Erdogan. Since this specific decision was presented as an actor failure, rather than governmental failure (Brändström & Kuipers, 2003), other actors involved in the crisis management were able to keep a low profile. Overall, this tactic fits into a presentational strategy that aims at limiting blame by shaping public perceptions.

Transparency can be used as a strategy to limit blame during a crisis period. Transparency frequently enables governments to avoid speculation about governmental wrongdoing and often promotes accountability (Hood, 2010). Over the course of the pandemic, the government provided daily information about COVID-19 cases (the number of new infections, deaths, intensive care patients, etc.) and nationwide efforts to stop the spread of the virus. The Health Minister Koca along with other SAB members gave citizens detailed information about the nature of the virus, how it is transmitted, appropriate precautionary measures, and developments regarding treatment procedures.

However, even though the government stressed transparency in decision making process, no information was shared regarding the distribution of COVID-19 cases by age, sex, and the range of symptoms in confirmed cases. The Turkish Medical Association called on the government to provide greater transparency with respect to infected people, medication, the types of tests, access to tests, and the number of medical personnel being tested (Hekimlik, 2020). Human rights organizations in Turkey (such as The Human Rights Foundation of Turkey and the Progressive Lawyers Association) issued a public statement that called on the government to share information regularly with respect to prisoners' health (Human Rights Foundation of Turkey, 2020). It should also be noted that as of late June 2020, no opinion poll has been conducted to reveal citizens' evaluation of the government's performance. This pattern of limited information and disinterest in public opinion is not unusual given the Turkish leadership's increasing authoritarian tendencies. The outcome is, therefore, one of conflicted success (McConnell, 2011, 72). The government succeeded in making the "right" decisions but failed politically to capitalize on them—at least insofar as information and public opinion are concerned.

While avoiding and limiting blame have been the major concerns of Turkish policymakers throughout the crisis period, we also observe credit-claiming, an equally important aspect of leaders' political survival. Before COVID-19 reached its peak, Erdogan noted that while developed

countries were struggling to combat the virus, Turkey successfully curbed the spread of the disease (Daily Sabah, 2020). He often stressed Turkey's unique fight against the virus, boasting that Turkey not only responded to citizens' needs, but sent aid to countries to help them fight against the virus (Medyascope, 2020). President Erdogan's statements that focused on "turning the crisis into an opportunity" and Turkey's success in handling the crisis are clear examples of policymakers' incentives to highlight the positive and to accentuate their role in the creation of successful outcomes. These are examples of credit-claiming with a view to changing the public's perception about the crisis. As such, they comprise a presentational strategy with a focus on the positive to counter negativity bias (Hood, 2011).

In summary and against the backdrop of an unprecedented health crisis, Turkish policymakers resorted to a number of blame avoidance strategies which took the form of agency, presentational, and policy strategies. Credit-claiming was also used as a means to portray Turkey as a success story. Even though state officials gave utmost attention to avoiding blame and repeatedly boasted about governmental performance in the fight against the virus, "blaming" occurred with respect to the timing of the first lockdown announcement and insufficient transparency measures.

5 | CONCLUSION

Understanding crisis-induced accountability enriches the crisis management literature and has practical implications for national leaders, as well as the life and well-being of their constituents. Concomitantly, the comprehensive and unprecedented nature of the COVID-19 pandemic sharpens and also qualifies our findings.

The main finding of the comparative examination of Greece and Turkey points to renewed attention to credit-claiming strategies in addition to blame games in the aftermath of a crisis event. Crises do not always hurt incumbents (Boin & McConnell, 2008), because, as Edelman (1988, 31) observes, naming responses as policy failures *"is a political act, not a recognition of fact"*. The motive of re-election drives the accountability process, but the particular mix of credit-claiming and blame avoidance strategies depends on three contextual factors. First, the scope of the pandemic is worldwide, which afforded many countries the time to act and draw policy lessons (Petridou et al., 2020 [this issue]). Here, both Greek and Turkish leaders acted in similar fashion. Lockdown measures were previously implemented in other countries, for example, China, while Italy (and the UK, see Colfer, 2020 [this issue]) served as the morbid reminder of what happens when they are ignored. Second, the pandemic's embodied nature allows for responsibility-sharing so that leaders can "have their cake and eat it, too." Citizens in democratic societies must take charge of their own health while heeding warnings by experts and the state, thereby sharing responsibility and diffusing accountability. Here, the case of Turkey points to institutional limitations. Despite democratic credentials, authoritarian tendencies explain why the Turkish leadership fell short when it came to transparency and public opinion support. As underlined by Bakir (2020), while *presidentialisation* of the executive branch and strong bureaucratic loyalty have been instrumental in the country's swift and decisive responses to the pandemic, they also create permissive ground for policy design and implementation failures due to the limited discretionary power of the state bureaucracy and limited participation of societal actors in policy design.

Third, crises often create a "rally round the flag" effect, which tends to temporarily reduce incumbent criticism in the name of national unity and a common external threat (e.g., Baker & O'Neal, 2001). The crisis management literature tends to view accountability mostly in terms of blame avoidance (e.g., Boin et al., 2017), but we find that such breathing room provides leaders with the opportunity to get things right with minimal political pressures. If initial measures prove to be successful, as they

were in our cases by containing the virus spread and minimizing deaths, leaders find it easier to craft legitimation narratives that simultaneously silence the opposition.

What happens when transparency meets accountability? Departing from Hood's (2007) depiction, we find transparency is used as a legitimating and a rhetorical device. Both countries claimed to use transparency in reporting cases and deaths, despite complaints in Turkey of insufficient information and lack of disaggregated data. Fox (2007) argues the relationship between the two is contingent on timing, institutional links, sanctions, and political aims. Our findings support and extend Fox's argument to crisis responses. We conclude that transparency underpins the entire accountability process as a blame-limiting mechanism. The Greek and Turkish cases demonstrate that leaders may manage fundamental crises but achieve success in different areas. They may not claim credit for every success, but by acting strategically they might successfully avoid blame for any failure. Whether this holds true as economies begin to recover and return to "politics as usual" remains to be seen.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors have no conflict of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Nikolaos Zahariadis, Evangelia Petridou, and Lacin Idil Oztig confirm that they jointly contributed to the authorship of this article and that they assume joint responsibility for the text.

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