

Opinion: Why some politicians crave your rage—and three ways to resist the game

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The Nobel prize-winning economist Elinor Ostrom once wrote about ["the danger of self-evident truths"](#) within academic research, warning that they were often wrong, or at the very least misleading.

Since its earliest emergence as an academic discipline, political science has been forged around the self-evident truth that "blame is bad" and that any rational politician would always prioritize avoiding blame above seeking credit.

As a result, a sweeping seam of scholarship can be traced from Machiavelli's oft-cited dictum that "princes should delegate to others the enactment of unpopular measures and keep in their own hands the distribution of favors." Studies have looked at ["the politics of blame"](#) and have analyzed ["blame games."](#) Some have looked at how [blame feeds into crisis management](#) and others have dissected the complex relationship between [blame and credit](#).

The problem is that the "self-evident truth" that politicians will always seek to avoid being blamed is wrong. A [new politics of blame seeking](#) has emerged, in which politicians deploy antagonism strategically and then capitalize on the ensuing backlash. They effectively want you to blame them, so that they can weaponize their victimhood.

Former US president and 2024 candidate Donald Trump and other populist politicians have mastered a new form of "wedge politics" that demonstrates this tactic to great effect. Antagonizing and othering opponents serves to generate credit among "their" section of an increasingly polarized electorate. The more controversial you are, the more you break the rules, reject convention and court controversy, the more you are blamed by conventional politicians. Instead of being a drain on your popularity, this blame only adds to your legitimacy in the eyes of those who have lost faith in conventional politics.

Describe gay men as ["tank-topped bum boys"](#), as former British prime minister Boris Johnson did, [promote insurrection](#), [spread alternative truths](#), use humor to hurt and demonize but then hide behind the shield that it was ["just a joke"](#) or relativize racist claims as ["totally reasonable"](#)

—the politics of populist provocation has only one rule: antagonize but never apologize.

We have moved beyond an era in which our biggest concern was ["Teflon-coated" politicians](#) to whom blame never sticks. Avoiding blame is yesterday's tactic. It's a sign of the complexity of contemporary social change when political antagonism is interpreted as a form of authenticity —["just saying it like it is!"](#)

Former first lady Michelle Obama's suggestion that ["when they go low, we go high"](#) may chart out a righteous political path, but it risks leaving its proponents open to being perceived as self-righteous, smug and sanctimonious and therefore even more reproachable in the eyes of the "left-behind." Those who take the moral high ground also risk being left behind and overlooked in an increasingly dramatic and sensationalized media context.

So, what can be done to thwart the blame-seeker's strategy? There are three components to the ideal approach.

1. Don't overreact

Democracy's defenders should try not to [react to every populist provocation](#). Instead, they should conserve their rage for [extreme events](#) where the broader public are more likely to see the perils of populism. The model should be how experienced parents deal with recalcitrant teenagers—they pick their battles wisely.

Let the kids vent a little while telling them clearly that you see through their provocative games and set clear boundaries for stronger norm violations. Ignore Trump when he violates norms of civility by calling people names. Take action when he violates [core democratic values](#) by threatening political opponents or inciting violence.

2. Set clear rules

Johnson's premiership revealed the weakness of the British constitution, which relies almost completely on informal norms and conventions. Even in countries with more robust constitutions than the UK's ["good chaps theory of government"](#), there is much to be said for codifying norms and delineating discretion.

These codified norms are especially powerful if they move a topic from one of political debate to potentially legal conflict. Under a clear set of rules, blame-seeking becomes more costly and difficult to implement. This could be observed in the hush money trial of Donald Trump. During this legal conflict, Trump struggled to employ many of the attention-grabbing techniques he could easily leverage in a purely political setting.

The reasoning of the former president for wanting to be handcuffed behind his back and made to do a ["perp walk"](#)—a highly visible and dramatized shaming—was that he wanted to turn the event into a spectacle that would allow him to project defiance in the face of what he portrayed as an unfair prosecution. This would galvanize his supporters behind him for his 2024 presidential campaign. However, the court's refusal to give him what he wanted illustrates that blame seekers' capabilities to write the political playbook are more limited in court.

3. Reach across the divide, where possible

Those hoping to prevent blame seekers from manipulating their audiences should make it their business to challenge partisanship. Democracy's defenders should not only make blame seeking harder to implement and raise the costs for those willing to engage in it; they should also offer concrete incentives and benefits to those actors who

decide not to play the blame-seeking game.

When the Democrats [moved](#) to support the Republican house speaker Mike Johnson against attacks from Marjorie Taylor Greene, a representative from his own party, they displayed an excellent example of this strategy.

The politics of blame is arguably far more complex and multi-dimensional than has generally been acknowledged. In some contexts, being blamed is good. Those who wish to expose and condemn such strategies can fight back, but it takes strategic thinking. Waiting for blame seekers to change their ways is not an option.

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