

**Citizens' Blame of Politicians for Public Service Failure:**  
*Experimental Evidence about Blame Reduction through Delegation  
and Contracting*

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# **Citizens' Blame of Politicians for Public Service Failure: Experimental Evidence about Blame Reduction through Delegation and Contracting**

## **Abstract**

Theories of blame suggest that contracting out public service delivery reduces citizens' blame of politicians for service failure. We use an online experiment with 1,000 citizen participants to estimate the effects of information cues summarizing service delivery arrangements on citizens' blame of English local government politicians for poor street maintenance. Participants were randomized to one of four cues: no information about service delivery arrangements, politicians' involvement in managing delivery, delegation to a unit inside government managing delivery, and delegation through a contract with a private firm managing delivery. The politicians' managing delivery cue raises blame compared to citizens having no information. However, the contract with a private firm cue doesn't reduce blame compared to either no information or the politicians' managing delivery cue. Instead, the delegation to a unit inside government cue reduces blame compared to politicians managing delivery, suggesting delegation to public managers not contracting reduces blame in this context.

## **Introduction**

Blame, defined as the act of attributing a ‘bad’ or ‘wrong’ outcome or action to a particular person, group or organizational entity by an audience, is a central part of citizens’ interaction with politicians and public managers (Weaver 1986; McGraw 1990; 2001; Hood 2003; 2011). Blame spurs citizens and users to complain and to vote against incumbent politicians and, because of negativity bias entailing greater magnitude of response to failure than success, is generally seen as more powerful than credit (Lyons, Lowery and DeHoog 1992; Boyne et al. 2009; Dowding and John 2012). Christopher Hood (2003; 2011, 67–89) has suggested contracting of public service delivery by governments as an ‘agency strategy’ for politicians to use delegation of managing delivery of the service to the contractor to avoid blame for potential service failures. This expectation is reasonable because institutional structures have sheltered politicians from blame in several other contexts. Blame for natural disasters and for funding cuts to services has been found to be spread across levels and branches of government and is influenced by descriptions of office-holders’ involvement (Weaver 1987; Arnold 1990; Malhotra and Kuo 2008; Mortensen 2012).

Whether contracting service delivery actually reduces citizens’ blame of politicians when public services fail has not previously been subjected to systematic empirical investigation. It is an important question because contracting to deliver services commissioned by governments and paid for by taxation is common across many types of public services and jurisdictions (Brown, Potoski and Van Slyke 2006; Greve 2008). The blame theory perspective on contracting is a valuable alternative to the economic efficiency and legal responsibility perspectives that predominate in the current literature on contracting (Savas 1987; Hodge 2000; for a review see Bel and Fageda 2009). The attribution of blame

for service failure is an integral part of systems of public services because of the democratic control relationship between citizens and politicians for those services and deserves specific empirical evaluation. If contracting out reduces blame then such structures could potentially even be used by politicians to insulate themselves from citizens' criticism of service failures, which might weaken democratic control over these services.

The first section of this article sets out a theory of citizens' blame of politicians for service failure, which suggests that use of contracting out services as a structure for delivering public services is a form of information cue for citizens. Information cues are 'shortcut' labels and summaries that provide information that allows citizens to economize on the mass of possible information available about political issues. Cues have been found to be influential on citizens' perceptions, attitudes and behaviors in related contexts (Downs 1957; Lupia and McCubbins 1998; James 2011a). The second section sets out an experiment to evaluate hypothesized reductions in citizens' blame of politicians from a cue about contracted service delivery managed by a private firm in contrast to cues about alternative ways of managing service delivery. We focus on a core local public service, street maintenance in English local government under the supervision of elected politicians. The experiment used an online panel of 1,000 citizens and presented them with a photographic representation to show a poor service, drawing on previously used visual methods to present service outcomes to citizens (Van Ryzin, Immerwahr and Altman 2008; Van Ryzin 2013). This scenario was followed by random allocation of four different information cues about the form of service delivery: 1) management of service delivery contracted to a private firm, 2) no information about managing service delivery, 3) delivery within the local government with management by a delegated unit, and 4) politicians directly involved in managing service delivery.

Following receipt of one of these cues, citizens were asked about their blame of politicians enabling us to compare blame between groups receiving the different cues.

The third section sets out the findings that lead us to question the theoretical expectation of contracting reducing citizens' blame of politicians for failure. The information cue about managing using delegation through contracting to a private firm does not reduce blame compared both to having no information about service delivery and to a cue about politicians managing delivery. However, contracting entails both delegation and the use of a particular form of contractor and we find that delegation of delivery to a unit within the local government does reduce blame. The fourth section develops the implication of this finding that the choice of type of delivery organization matters for blame. Whilst politicians cannot use contracting to a private firm as a blame avoidance strategy they can use delegation to a unit within local government. In addition, if politicians explicitly highlight their own association with the management of public service delivery, for example to garner approval from citizens by taking a hands-on role in managing services, they risk higher blame compared to when citizens are unaware of service delivery arrangements. Politicians need to be very careful to ensure that those services they are associated with managing are not perceived of as failing to avoid heightened blame.

### **Blame for service failure and contracting**

Avoiding blame is typically more important to politicians and public managers than claiming credit because of negativity bias. Failures tend to be remembered more than successes and politicians often get less credit for their successes than blame for their failures (Lau 1982; 1985; Weaver 1987). The asymmetry occurs in citizens' responses to economic outcomes

(Soroka 2006) and comparisons of wealth between countries (Hansen, Olsen and Bech 2014). In the context of public services, citizens' expectations about service quality respond more to information about previous low performance than information about previous high performance (James 2011b). Negative framing of the same public service performance information has been found more influential than positive framing (Olsen 2015), and transparency initiatives sometimes entail negative aspects of performance being given particular prominence (Grimmelikhuijsen and Meijer 2014). Information about good performance produced by government agencies is less credible to citizens than the same information coming from more independent sources. This lack of credibility is not apparent when reporting bad performance, suggesting that people are more believing of bad news about performance than good news (James and Van Ryzin 2015). Politicians are anxious to avoid blame for bad performance because voters punish local incumbent politicians more for relatively low performance than they reward them for relatively high performance (Boyne et al. 2009).

Public services typically involve politicians acting within a democratic framework using public authority to obtain resources for service provision, often through taxes, and then arranging for the services to be delivered. This situation is typical of local representative governments providing public services in many jurisdictions, including our empirical context of English local government. Contracts are one form of implementation structure that politicians have available for the delivery of public services, involving an agreement between the public authority and another organization managing delivery. There are many different types of not-for-profit or for-profit organization used as contractors; we focus on the use of private firms as contractors, which is common practice in many jurisdictions (Brown, Potoski and Van Slyke 2006; Greve 2008). This kind of contract is written and enforceable by law

with the contract typically specifying a price, a schedule for delivery, the service being delivered and quality standards (Cohen and Eimicke 2008, 4). In this sense, contracting is a special form of delegation, which is defined more generally as the handing over of responsibility for something—for example a set of tasks, a decision, or implementation of a service.

Contracting out of public service delivery could affect the allocation of blame to local politicians by citizens if the service fails, in the sense of not meeting a normative expectation of acceptable performance, because the contractor manages the delivery of the service. Psychological research has found that individuals attribute outcomes to individuals and organizations and this affects their allocation of blame (Schlenker et al. 1994; Alicke 2000; Rudolph 2006). Similarly, studies of blame in political institutions share a focus on audience reaction to perceived failures (for overviews see Weaver 1986; Hood 2011). Citizens view politicians' involvement in failure in terms of causality (the extent to which they caused, through their action or inaction, the failure) and the severity of outcomes (which also affects blame). Citizens' judgements are informed by their view of politicians' capacities for foreseeing and/or intending the consequence of failure, taking into account relevant factors including other actors and organizations. When citizens see the performance outcomes of a service as much lower than in comparable jurisdictions delivering the same service they are more likely to see the local politicians as being, at least in part, responsible for the poor performance (James and Moseley 2014). The extent of politicians' obligation or duty to prevent failure, for example by moral or legal codes or social norms, further sets the context for blame. Complex and conflicting values and obligations may also affect citizens' perceptions of blame of politicians, and could potentially represent grounds for political forgiveness (see Nieuwenburg 2015) which would reduce blame.

Within the theoretical framework on blame presented in this article, a contract for service delivery is an information cue for citizens showing that someone other than politicians is involved in the service delivery, potentially reducing blame if the service fails. Information cues are summary statements that reveal key information and avoid the overly demanding requirement, in terms of time, cognitive and other resources, of citizens having full information about political life. Cues have been found to influence attitudes across a range of contexts in politics (Downs 1957; Lupia and McCubbins 1998; Hobolt, Tilley and Wittrock 2013), including citizens' perceptions of the performance of public services (James 2011a). Sometimes a cue is just a label, for example a label about the political party in control of an administration, but they can be any summary characterization of a broader or more complex situation using a much shortened form. We theorize that the cues about contracting influence citizens' blame allocation to the local politicians, helping them relate the failure event to these actors (Alicke 2000; Schlenker et al. 1994).

Findings from executive politics suggest this expectation about the contracting cue is reasonable. Jurisdictional responsibility, especially across multiple levels of government, has consequences for citizens' blame of politicians (Arceneaux and Stein 2006; Schneider 2008; Hobolt, Tilley and Wittrock 2013; Healy and Malhotra 2010). Blurred lines of accountability tend to weaken blame; voters are less likely to punish governments for poor economic performance in systems where executive power is dispersed (see Powell and Whitten 1993; Anderson 2000; Hobolt, Tilley and Wittrock 2013). Local government units try to blame central government to avoid local criticism for unpopular outcomes (Mortensen 2012). Nielsen and Baekgaard (2015) found that concerns about blame influence local politicians' reception of performance information and their attitudes to spending on public services.



Public inquiries by ministers in central government, under some circumstances, have shifted blame to agencies and away from ministers (Sulitzeanu-Kenan 2010). In understanding blame for rare and extreme events, Malhotra and Kuo (2008) found that party cues and job titles cause individuals to blame officials of the opposite party for failings that stemmed from Hurricane Katrina's extensive damage to New Orleans in 2005. Similarly, Marvel (2014) found partisan influences, with public administrators' analysis of the 2013 Boston Marathon attack being viewed as more credible by Democrat than Republican party supporters.

Similar support for contracting reducing blame comes from experience in legislative politics. Legislative politicians manipulate chains of traceability during the legislative process (Arnold 1990) and keep delegation to regulatory agencies broad rather than specific in part to avoid blame for unpopular policy outcomes (Fiorina 1982). Weimer (2006) found regulators delegating rulemaking to stakeholders affected by the rule to avoid blame for these decisions. Legislators use strategies to manipulate citizens' judgments about who was responsible to manage blame when they vote for unpopular legislation (McGraw 1990; 1991; 2001). In these terms, the information cue about delegation of service delivery to a private contractor can be seen as a form of mitigation that potentially reduces citizens' blame of politicians. Further support for this expectation comes from evidence about the delegation of decisions. Bartling and Fischbacher (2012) found that blame of a 'principal' who made decisions affecting a recipient was reduced by delegating unpopular (for the recipient) decisions to others.

Scholars have conducted very little empirical research on contracting and blame in public services. However, Hood's (2011, 67–89) work on 'agency strategies' for avoiding blame suggests that, in theory, contracting service delivery passes on at least part of the

responsibility from politicians to contractors, shifting blame for failure away from politicians. Having multiple organizations involved in services tends to reduce the blame for any particular organization (Hood 2011, 123). The blame theory perspective on contracting is a valuable alternative to economic and legal theories that predominate in the current literature on contracting. In this article we do not seek to mount a tournament between the competing theories but instead to set out the blame theory, how it differs from the better known alternatives, and to evaluate its empirical implications. The economic theory of contracting analyses contracting primarily in terms of effects on economy, effectiveness and efficiency of service provision. The expertise of contractors, economies of scale or their specialist resources bring benefits on these dimensions and are argued to be reasons for their use (Bel and Fageda 2009). Theories of political blame instead suggest that this neglects the impact of political accountability structures and negativity bias, which makes blame and its avoidance a key concern of politicians using contracts. Legal theories are an alternative perspective with public authorities transferring some aspects of legal liability to a contractor, with potential for them or others to sue for failings. However, legal responsibility cannot always be passed on to avoid liability, for example, in the United States, 'state action' has frequently been adjudicated to extend into public tasks handled by privately owned contractors (Malatesta and Carboni 2014). The blame theory of contracting suggests, regardless of the legal position, that citizens may hold politicians less to blame when a service is contracted out because the contractors play an active role in service delivery.

Focusing on public services, we identify the effects of an information cue about contracting service delivery. Our interest is in cases where citizens face a service that clearly falls short of a reasonable standard. The issue is how far local politicians, as the collective elected political executive for a locality, are seen as to blame when in receipt of a cue about

contracted services in comparison to when citizens are in receipt of alternative cues about different forms of service delivery as benchmarks for comparison. The first benchmark compares the information cue about contracting with the circumstances of a cue containing no information about the form of service delivery. The no information cue is relevant to actual service contexts because, whilst some citizens may know about local management structures, the literature on political knowledge stresses the unevenness of factual knowledge. A consistent finding is the widespread lack of knowledge about political institutions and how they operate (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1997). If citizens do not know a contractor is involved they cannot consider this as a mitigating factor in reducing politicians' responsibility for the service failure. The comparison with this benchmark suggests the first hypothesis:

H1: An information cue that local politicians have chosen to have the service delegated through a contract with a private firm managing day-to-day service delivery reduces citizens' blame of local politicians for service failure compared to a cue with no information about service delivery.

The second benchmark entails comparing the information cue about contracting with a cue in which citizens are told that politicians are involved in managing the day-to-day delivery of street maintenance. The explicit mention of politicians' role potentially links them with the service failure more closely in the minds of citizens. This cue does not suggest that politicians are taking up shovels and actually repairing the streets themselves. Instead, it states that politicians are involved in the *management* of service delivery, reflecting overlap between politics and administration. Andrews and Boyne (2010) note political leadership as part of the management of services in English local government and identify its effects on service performance. In the same domain, Copus' (2014, 179) study of 30 local political

leaders and associated elected politicians found that many ‘link their role and responsibilities very firmly to service-based activities and not only to the provision or oversight of public services, but also to the quality, cost and efficiency of those services.’ The role is of general relevance. For example, in the US, many elected mayors are concerned with the practical management of services, such as preparedness for bad weather. They also engage actively with hands-on management tools such as performance measurement systems (Ho 2006). Where politicians’ role in management of delivery is extensive this role can be made apparent to citizens in a cue, suggesting the second hypothesis:

H2: An information cue that local politicians have chosen to have the service delegated through a contract with a private firm managing day-to-day service delivery reduces citizens’ blame of local politicians for service failure compared to a cue that politicians have chosen to be involved in managing day-to-day service delivery.

Our definition of contracting regards it as a specific form of delegation through politicians making use of a contract with a private firm. We also consider an alternative cue about a different form of delegation entailing delegation of management of service delivery to a unit *within* the local government. Local governments typically use their own public managers and associated staff to manage delivery of services in cases where delivery is not contracted out. The relationship between politicians and those they employ to manage is at the heart of public management research. However, there is very little systematic empirical evidence about whether highlighting public managers’ involvement in service delivery shields politicians from blame. We assess whether this cue reduces blame compared to the two benchmarks of no information about delivery structures and politicians being involved in managing service delivery.

## **An experiment about blame for poor street maintenance**

We conducted an online experiment with 1,000 citizens to assess the effect of information cues on citizens' views about local politicians' blame for service failure. Hood (2011, 159) argues that it is difficult to assess institutions' effects on blame because 'the social science technology for testing such efficacy is still in its infancy'. However, experiments using randomization are a useful method for estimating effects on blame by allocating the four cues randomly to different groups of participants. Such a research design is also more practicable than, for example, trying to get local governments randomly allocated to use or not use contracts with private firms. We presented the participants in the experiment, which was approved by an institutional ethical review board, a hypothetical but realistic service failure of local street maintenance services, followed by random allocation of information cues about the forms of service delivery.

Study participants were recruited from an online panel of citizens run by Global Market Insite (GMI). The internet is a reliable way of recruiting samples and can even reduce biases found in traditional samples (Gosling et al. 2004; Buhrmester, Kwang and Gosling 2011). Gosling et al. (2004, 93) found that large internet samples are typically diverse in terms of gender, socio-economic status, geographical region and age and found self-reporting internet questionnaires were consistent with responses from traditional (paper-and-pen) methods. High quality online panel studies yield more representative samples than in-person convenience samples, which commonly rely on student participants (Gosling et al. 2004; Berinsky, Huber and Lenz 2012, 351). Esterling, Neblo and Lazer (2011, 486) note that GMI panel samples are only slightly less representative in terms of diversity compared to the

general population. For our experiment, GMI recruited 1,277 panel members to open the survey. From this group, 1,000 participants passed an instructional manipulation check (as recommended by Oppenheimer, Meyvis and Davidenko (2009)) of correctly moving a slider to a specific point on the scale to test attention and guard against click-through responses without reading the materials and were randomly allocated to one of the four information cue groups.

The sample size is sufficiently large to have sufficient statistical power to detect effects of providing information on citizens' attitudes of a magnitude found in previous studies (James 2011a; 2011b; James and Moseley 2014; James and Van Ryzin 2015). The sample's characteristics are similar to those of the broader population of England (which stands at 53.9m). However, it has a higher mean age and unemployment level and a higher mean proportion educated beyond school, as well as a lower non-White proportion. In terms of regional spread it also slightly under-represents London and over-represents the Midlands, but has good overall distribution across regions and on other variables, as summarized in Table 1. Overall, the sample allows good generalisability to the broader population of citizens and is much more representative than a student sample. As shown in Table 2, randomization resulted in similarity across the experimental groups on all these variables, and ANOVA tests revealed no statistically significant differences between the groups, suggesting that the procedure for random assignment was successfully implemented.

Table 1: Summary statistics of the experimental sample and mean values for the general population

Variable	Mean	Standard deviation	Minimum	Maximum	England (mean)
Age in years	50.62	15.21	16	82	40

Household after tax income in pounds	22,329	15,524.8	3928	75,526	24,780
Female	0.50	0.5	0	1	0.51
Unemployed	0.09	0.28	0	1	0.06
Education beyond school	0.57	0.50	0	1	0.41
Full time student	0.03	0.17	0	1	0.04
Ethnicity non-white	0.07	0.25	0	1	0.15
Rural	0.21	0.41	0	1	0.19
Region London	0.10	0.30	0	1	0.15
Region south	0.37	0.48	0	1	0.37
Region midlands	0.29	0.45	0	1	0.20
Region north	0.25	0.43	0	1	0.28

Source: Survey and Office for National Statistics 2011

Table 2: Characteristics of participants in the four experimental groups

Variable	Politicians manage delivery	Delegated unit within local government	Contract with a private company	No information about delivery structure
Age (mean)	50.63	50.93	51.02	49.90
Income (mean)	22075.38	22813.79	21789.08	22636.96
Female	126	135	123	116
Unemployed	24	21	20	23
Education (beyond	140	137	141	147

school)				
Full time student	6	7	7	11
Ethnicity (non-white)	20	12	15	19
Rural	50	63	49	51
Region (London, South, Midlands, North)	29	23	30	19
	90	92	91	93
	72	73	65	78
	59	62	64	60
Per experimental group	250	250	250	250

Participants were asked to imagine they lived in an area called Normaltown with locally elected politicians using taxes to fund street maintenance services. Participants were presented with photographic evidence of service failure with three photographs clearly showing poorly maintained streets (see Appendix 1). Visual information influences perceptions in similar service contexts (Van Ryzin, Immerwahr and Altman 2008) and has previously been used to influence perceptions of service quality in an experiment (Van Ryzin 2013). We use the same approach, with photographs of ‘category 1 defects’ of the kind ‘representing an immediate or imminent hazard’ or a rapidly developing risk of ‘structural deterioration’ (Department for Transport 2012).

Having viewed the photographs, respondents’ perceptions of street maintenance quality were measured to confirm that the service was perceived as poor. A multi-item



measure was used with four items. First, for the safety of all street users, second, for visual appearance, third, for quality of the ride if driving or riding in a car or other form of transport, and, fourth, for overall quality. The items 1 (safety) and 3 (quality of the ride) are aspects of quality used by Poister and Thomas (2011) in measuring citizens' perceptions of state highways. The two further items relate to other important aspects of citizens' views of street quality (Department for Transport 2012). Participants' mean street quality assessment was 8.57 (standard deviation 11.80), on a scale from 0 = extremely poor to 100 = extremely good, which indicates that the service quality was indeed perceived of as very poor, potentially triggering blame. [Note 1]

Immediately following the presentation of the service failure, participants were presented with hypothetical information from the Normaltown local government website about the service. This sequencing draws on research about responses to negative outcomes that suggests that citizens are likely to seek out information about service delivery structures following service failure. Wong and Weiner (1981) show that people search for explanations of events and their causes following negative outcomes and Folkes (1984) found consumers to be motivated to discover reasons behind problems with products or services. However, ambiguity about the level of government responsible for services confuses citizens' judgements in some systems (DeHoog, Lowery, and Lyons 1990). In contrast, the English system is clearer in allocating local streets to non-overlapping territorial local government jurisdictions but, to avoid any potential ambiguity, we told all participants that Normaltown local government politicians funded the service.

In the experiment, participants were randomly allocated to four experimental conditions (250 in each group) with different information cues about the managing of street

maintenance service delivery (see Table 3 and Appendix 1). The random allocation of cues enables the consequences for blame to be attributed to the variation of treatment with the groups probabilistically similar to each other in other respects (Shadish, Cook and Campbell 2002, 1–12). The information presented reflects different information provided about forms of service delivery by local governments in England from a survey of the websites of a random sample of 20 of the 152 ‘upper tier’ local governments. One website provided no information about management of service delivery, two cases had information about contracting delivery to a private firm, one case presented politicians as having an active role in managing day to day delivery and sixteen cases had information about delegation within the local government.

Table 3: Experimental groups to which participants were randomised

Group	Information cue
Group 1	No information about delivery structures
Group 2	Normaltown Local Government politicians managing day-to-day delivery
Group 3	Delegation through a contract with a delegated unit within Normaltown Local Government, with the unit’s managers managing day-to-day delivery
Group 4	Delegation through a contract with a firm, Normaltown Private Company, with the company’s managers managing day-to-day delivery

Following the information cue treatments, participants were asked about blame of local politicians using a five-item measure. We adapted McGraw’s (1991, 1140) measure of blame. She asked ‘To what extent do you believe [politician] is deserving of blame for his budget amendment vote?’ and, as part of a broader analysis of political blame, examined the influence of shared responsibility for unpopular legislative outcomes on citizens’ blame of individual legislative politicians. We substituted local government politicians who control a local government as a group potentially to blame for failure. As a development of previous measures, to increase validity in the context of public services, we used multiple items of

blame for specific aspects of the service known to be important to citizens (see Appendix 1 for the full blame measurement items). The item of blame about ‘standards for the quality of the street surfaces’ reflects citizens’ expectations about what service quality should be (Poister and Thomas 2011; James 2011; Van Ryzin 2013). They compare their preferred standards to perceived local standards, potentially blaming local politicians if they think the standards are not appropriate. The item of blame for ‘budget for street maintenance’ measures citizens’ blame of politicians for the budget being inadequate or too generous. Glaser and Hildreth (1999) show that citizens differ in willingness to pay for local services, suggesting that politicians can be blamed or rewarded for having an appropriate level of spending. The item of blame for ‘street surface quality outcomes shown in the photos’ draws on research that shows how citizens perceptions of public service outcomes affect a range of attitudes about the services (see Lyons, Lowery and DeHoog 1992; Van Ryzin, Immerwahr and Altman 2008; James 2011b), with poor outcomes likely to attract blame. The item of blame for ‘how street maintenance services are organized’ draws on Van Ryzin (2011) who notes how process as well as service outcomes matter for citizens’ attitudes towards services. In the full sample, the blame measure has a mean of 77.59, a standard deviation of 20.78 and the scores range from 0 to 100 (0 = not at all to blame, 100 = completely to blame). [Note 2]

## **Results**

We analysed the effects of different information cues about delivery of street maintenance services. Table 4 reports results using regression models with dummy variables for each form of information cue to test the two hypotheses about the contracting cue reducing blame. To check the robustness of findings and potentially to reduce the standard errors of the estimates we report models including covariates that affect citizens’ attitudes towards public services

similar to blame. These are gender, age, employment, education, ethnicity, income, rural/non rural residency (Lyons Lowery and DeHoog 1992; Glaser and Hildreth 1999; Brown 2007; Van Ryzin, Immerwahr and Altman 2008; James 2011b). We also include controls for different regions with London as the base category. We report the findings in two sets of models with different baselines to show more explicitly the results of the test the hypotheses (Models 1 and 2 to test Hypothesis 1 and Models 3 and 4 to test Hypothesis 2).[\[Note 3\]](#)

Table 4: Citizens' blame of local politicians for street maintenance service: linear regressions with information cue treatments and covariates

Variables	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Politicians manage delivery	5.16*** (2.78)	4.94*** (2.67)		
Delegated unit within local government	1.00 (0.54)	0.77 (0.41)	-4.16** (-2.25)	-4.18** (-2.26)
Contract with a private company	2.46 (1.33)	2.16 (1.17)	-2.70 (-1.46)	-2.78 (-1.51)
No information about delivery			-5.16*** (-2.78)	-4.94*** (-2.67)
Female		-0.38 (-0.29)		-0.38 (-0.29)
Age		0.15*** (3.11)		0.15*** (3.11)
Unemployed		-3.18 (-1.34)		-3.18 (-1.34)
Education beyond school		0.76 (0.55)		0.76 (0.55)
Full time student		-2.90 (-0.71)		-2.90 (-0.71)
Ethnicity non-white		1.88 (0.70)		1.88 (0.70)
Income		-0.00 (-0.82)		-0.00 (-0.82)
Rural		1.84 (1.12)		1.84 (1.12)
South		-2.71		-2.71

		(-1.14)		(-1.14)
Midlands		-1.70		-1.70
		(-0.69)		(-0.69)
North		-1.22		-1.22
		(-0.49)		(-0.49)
Constant	75.44***	70.23***	80.60***	75.17***
	(57.56)	(17.84)	(61.49)	(19.29)
Observations	1,000	1,000	1,000	1,000
F-test	2.93**	2.16***	2.93**	2.16***
R-squared	0.01	0.03	0.01	0.03
Adjusted R-squared	0.01	0.02	0.01	0.02

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t-statistics in parentheses

\*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1 for two tailed tests of null that coefficient = 0

The results are contrary to the main expectations of the simple theory of contracting and blame and reveal more complex responses by citizens. Model 1 in Table 4 shows that contracting does not reduce blame compared to no information about service delivery, contrary to Hypothesis 1. Model 1 also shows that the information cue that politicians are involved in managing day to day delivery raises blame by 5.16 percentage points, 95% CI: [1.52, 8.80], from the cue of no information baseline of 75.44. This increase in blame shows that politicians who explicitly associate themselves with management of public service delivery face increased blame if the service is a failure.

Model 3 shows that contracting does not reduce blame compared to being told that politicians manage service delivery, contrary to Hypothesis 2. However, there is support for ‘delegation’, with the management of service delivery by a delegated unit within local government reducing blame by 4.16 percentage points, 95% CI: [-7.80, -0.53], from the cue of politicians involved in managing service delivery baseline level of 80.60. This reduction in blame shows that the cue about delegation, but not delegation through contracting to a private

firm, can reduce blame compared to politicians who explicitly associate themselves with management of public service delivery.

## **Discussion**

The information cue about delegation reduces blame in contrast to politicians being involved in managing service delivery but not compared to citizens given no information about service delivery. Both contrasts are important for public service delivery, the former when citizens seek out or are made aware of the service delivery structures and the latter when they are not aware. Research on general political knowledge (Delli Carpini and Ketter 1997) and knowledge about public service delivery (Van Slyke and Roch 2004) shows that citizens often lack information. In these circumstances, the question then becomes whether citizens actively seek out, or are otherwise provided with, information to reveal the delivery structures, which we discuss in the conclusion.

The findings show that all the information cue conditions raise blame at least slightly when compared to the no information cue. These increases are possibly because raising the subject of delivery arrangements increases citizens' thoughts about who is involved in the failure and to blame, triggering an increased blame response.

The inclusion of covariates in Models 2 and 4 in Table 4 does not substantially alter the main findings of the analysis and confirms the results of the hypothesis tests are robust to the inclusion of these covariates. Age is positively related to blame, but we do not interpret this or any of the other covariates causally because it was not part of our experimental manipulation. [Note 4]

## Conclusion

The results challenge the expectation of the simple theory of contracting and blame that citizens who are informed that the management of service delivery is contracted out to a private firm reduce their blame of local politicians when there is a failure. However, contracting involves both delegation by politicians and use of the private contractor and the results show that a cue about delegation to a unit within the local government reduces blame of politicians compared to a cue about them being involved in managing service delivery. The findings suggest that politicians seeking to avoid blame can use delegation as an ‘agency strategy’ to reduce blame from citizens by stressing the role of public managers in carrying out service delivery rather than politicians’ own role in the domain of the management of delivery.

The reduction in blame may partially protect politicians from citizens’ behavioural responses following on from failure. There are good reasons to think that even a modest reduction in blame improves outcomes for politicians. Previous research has found that it typically takes very high levels of dissatisfaction before individuals will exercise their political voice and complain or vote in protest against incumbents (Dowding and John 2012, 92-3; James and Mosely 2014). Similarly, very high dissatisfaction is needed to trigger exit by leaving a local service provider because of the high costs of this action (Dowding and John 2012, 95-97). Reducing blame from very high levels is likely to make critical voice and exit responses to failure less likely. Analysis at the aggregate voting level has established that incumbent politicians in English local government, on average, suffer electoral damage from their association with poorly performing services in the areas they control (Boyne et al.

2009). Evidence about citizen blame for service failure at the individual level sheds light on an important part of the mechanism by which these aggregate results are generated and suggests a research agenda of examining whether differences in local delivery structures are associated with variation around this average result. In particular, when citizens see politicians as being directly involved in managing service delivery of a failing service they afford them the highest blame of the four delivery conditions, potentially triggering the most electoral damage. The findings imply, for example, that local mayors who make public statements to explicitly increase their association with managing preparedness for storms, or local politicians who pledge to use their skills in working with administrators to drive up the performance of local services, will suffer a stronger political backlash if citizens subsequently perceive these services negatively.

The results indicate that the type of organization chosen by politicians to manage service delivery matters to citizens, confirming that citizens care about the process of service delivery not just service outcomes (Van Ryzin 2011; Van Slyke and Roch 2004). Street maintenance in England shows evidence of partial ‘blame reversion’ (Hood 2011, 162) with citizens appearing not to accept information about private firms’ involvement in delivery as a reason to reduce their blame of politicians. There have been well publicized arguments between English politicians and private contractors about their respective contributions to causing service failures (Committee of Public Accounts 2014). In this context, 40 percent of citizens are either ‘very’ or ‘somewhat’ concerned about private companies being involved in public services compared to only 27 percent expressing the same view about charities and voluntary organizations (Populus 2012, 6). These attitudes are related to citizens’ views about the competence and motivation of public and private organizations that vary across jurisdictions and the nature of the service. Where citizens’ acceptance of private sector



involvement is lower than other forms, as in this case, politicians appear to be blamed for choosing to use a private firms rather than being able to pass on blame to the contractor. Future research should look at contracting and blame in contexts with different levels of support for types of organizational involvement in public services and the effect of using alternatives including not for profit organizations.

Failure of street maintenance is important to most citizens so they have an incentive to become informed about delivery structures as a potential reason for failure. However, Brown (2007) notes that citizens' satisfaction with local services differs according to whether they are a taxpayer and/or a consumer of the service.. For example, taxpayer, non-users, may care primarily about the tax-financed cost and may have less interest in discovering information about reasons for failure of service quality. Citizens typically have low levels of general political knowledge (Delli Carpini and Ketner 1997) and knowledge of some public services (Van Slyke and Roch 2004). Research should examine if citizens blame response is different for services that they do not themselves directly use. Potentially, politicians could even present citizens with misleading or false cues that do not match actual service delivery structures. However, this strategy is unlikely to be tenable for any period of time for many salient and widely used local services because local citizens have the means and incentives to become informed about them. Politicians attempting to reduce the risk of being blamed for service failure are only likely be successful in this aim if they pay careful attention to the type of organization they choose to manage delivery.

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## Notes

1. The scale was assessed using principal components factor analysis. Perceptions of surface quality factor has an eigenvalue of 3.11 indicating single dimensionality (a potential second factor has an eigenvalue of just 0.39). The factor loadings of each item are all similarly high (ranging from 0.83 to 0.93) helping justify the straightforward approach of using a mean score to create the perceptions of service measure. The alpha of 0.90 suggests the measure has good internal consistency.
2. The first factor eigenvalue of 3.80 suggests single dimensionality (a potential second factor has an eigenvalue of just 0.47). The factor loadings of each item are all similarly high (ranging from 0.78 to 0.91), helping justify using a mean score to create the blame measure. The alpha = 0.92 suggesting internal consistency.
3. Whilst the directional hypotheses could justify one tailed tests, the more conservative approach of reporting two tailed tests is adopted in Table 4.
4. The reduction in blame from the politicians managing delivery cue to the contracting cue and the reduction from the politicians managing delivery cue to the delegation inside the local government cue are not statistically significantly different from each other, and only the latter is statistically significant from the politicians managing delivery cue. Using robust standard errors in the regressions to check for robustness (results not reported) does not affect any of the findings from test results on the models.

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