

**Research project title:** To what extent is a government punished for the handling of the Covid pandemic and how do they avoid being blamed.

Governments adopted wide ranging policies in response to Covid-19. These included attempts to promote herd immunity (Bjorklund & Ewing 2020), different restrictions and lockdowns (Jessop 2020). While many governments received criticism for their handling of the pandemic (Edgington 2022) little is known about the actual impact on government support or whether governments managed to avoid the blame. Addressing these gaps in research are important when there are calls for greater scrutiny of government policy to ensure justice for those affected. In this way, the project promotes the University's research theme of Justice and equality.

Several analytical frameworks have been presented for analysing how governments can avoid the blame for controversial policies (e.g. Pierson 1994, Hering 2008). In this project I will draw on the most comprehensive attempt to theorise the blame avoidance strategies pursued by governments found in Giger and Nelson's study of welfare retrenchment (2011). Utilising their framework I will analyse the techniques governments used to avoid blame during the Covid-19 pandemic.

I have designed this project because it can help to make sense of the political consequences of the global pandemic and ensure accountability in the policy making process. The project will also contribute to the development of a framework for analysing government blame avoidance strategies across a variety of policy areas (with other potential applications e.g. studying climate change).

To carry out the project I will compare the strategies employed by governments in the UK and Sweden. These governments were selected because while they both presided over centralised political systems, they two adopted very different responses to the pandemic (Mishra et al. 2021). While the UK government managed to mostly maintain its popularity, in Sweden the government lost support and power (Duxbury 2021). The project is distinct in using comparative analysis to develop our understanding of blame avoidance allowing it to explore the role of variables such as ideological differences which have potential to shape government blame avoidance strategies. These variables are only recognised implicitly by Giger and Nelson leaving it unclear if they have more general relevance. Within this project I will ask:

- Why was the Swedish government punished for its response to Covid-19 but the UK government not?
- How did the blame avoidance strategies of the governments differ?
- What role does party leadership and ideology play in the effectiveness of blame avoidance strategies?

To address these questions and work within the Laidlaw Scholarship time frame, this project will analyse politician speeches, media statements and opinion polls. The project will examine the role of several variables in shaping blame avoidance strategies: ideology, leader agency, party competition and institutional structures. Selecting these key areas will ensure the project can be completed within the required timeframe. It is expected that the UK government went further in employing blame avoidance strategies because it remained in power during the Covid-19 pandemic proved effective in taking advantage of a weakened opposition (Knight 2021).