

# Smog-free or Smoke Screen?

Blame avoidance and symbolic instruments during the German coal exit decision.

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## Abstract

In this thesis, theories on blame avoidance and symbolic use of power are united to examine the case of the German coal exit decision. Did the government use the coal Commission as a symbolic instrument in order to avoid blame? To answer this question, classic theories on blame avoidance as a motivator in policymaking and on symbolic uses of power are presented. They are then combined with data gathered through two sources: A qualitative content analysis of newspaper articles regarding the coal exit and questionnaires. The data gathered through these methods were key in producing the findings: Blame avoidance is a strong motivator for policymakers in general and this case is no exemption. The motivation to avoid blame led to a focus on affected regions and a neglect of environmental concerns. In terms of symbolic uses of power, these were also present here. Symbols are created when politicians communicate with the public. In this case, this communication was characterized by open language and political communication methods. While both concepts were found in this case, a role of the Commission as a symbolic use of power to avoid blame can be negated.

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## Introduction

We are facing a climate crisis. Climate change and the resulting effects present significant risks never before seen by humans, including rising sea levels, droughts, floods and continually rising temperatures. Climate change is anthropogenic; therefore, action can be taken to try and lessen some of these effects (Clark et al., 2016). Hope is being pinned on officials to take action to prevent a crisis. Many of whom have made commitments to tackling climate change at domestic and international forums. For these political acts to be sustainable, they would have to be in accordance with democratic principles. The hope is that political decisions regarding climate change prevention will be made via the democratic process, involving affected actors in the decision-making process.

Germany is attempting to take action on climate change. German citizens are highly supportive of climate change policy making. According to the European Social Survey, 95.4 percent of Germans surveyed believe that climate change is real and 94.8 percent believe that it is at least partially caused by humans (Poortinga et al., 2018). Additionally, a 2019 poll found that 81 percent of Germans see a need for action against climate change (Ehni, 2019). It is therefore no surprise that Germany ratified the Paris Climate Agreement, pledging to take measures to keep the rise of average temperatures under two degrees Celsius. In 2016 the German government established the Climate Protection Plan 2050 to reach this goal. The plan aims to decrease greenhouse gas emissions by 55% until 2030 compared to 1990. Especially relevant to achieving this goal is making reforms in the energy sector. In 2016, coal power accounted for 40,3% of German energy production (Umweltbundesamt, 2017). Coal power is key in ensuring energy supply security and provides employment, but also contributes heavily to air pollution and CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. Climate scientists have made it clear that coal energy and a reduction of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions are not compatible (Quadrelli and Peterson, 2007). Therefore, a coal phase-out is important for Germany to attain its climate goals. However, a phase-out of coal power in Germany presents a number of conflicts: Coal regions, such as Saxony, Saxony-

Anhalt, Brandenburg and North Rhine-Westphalia, which rely heavily on the industry, need to be supported, many jobs will be lost, the energy supply needs to be secure, the consumer should not have to shoulder the costs through raised energy costs and environmental concerns need to be addressed. In order to ensure that no one will be left behind, the government, made up of the CDU/CSU and SPD, reached an agreement in their 2018 coalition contract to establish a Commission – the Commission for Growth, Structural Change and Employment - with the mandate to make concrete suggestions for a future-proof, sustainable coal phase-out, including structural development for the affected regions and climate considerations (Bundesministerium für Wirtschaft und Energie, 2018). The Commission for Growth, Structural Change and Employment is made up of 28 representatives of the government, environmental groups, economic experts, representatives of coal regions and unions. After seven months of deliberation, it presented its results in January 2019. The Commission had decided on compensation payments for operators, financial support for coal employees, structural help for the effected regions and a complete exit from coal power until 2038 at the latest (Bundesministerium für Wirtschaft und Energie, 2019). One year later, the cabinet decided to introduce the corresponding law, the Coal Exit Law, to phase-out coal usage in Germany. This draft law was widely criticized by environmental and economic experts for not being in accordance with the Commission's suggestions. Instead, it was said to be advantageous to operators and, in the opinion of environmental groups like Greenpeace, did not go far enough to protect the climate. Anke Herold of the Ecological Institute Freiburg is quoted as saying that the country is left with sham solutions which tend to exacerbate the climate crisis (Zeit Online, 2020).

This raises questions about the German government's commitment to an open decision-making process. This thesis asks why the proposed law differed from the compromise worked out by the Commission. Furthermore, it asks if the Commission just had a symbolic value during a controversial decision. A symbolic use of power can be defined as the exertion of power through the symbolic or instrumental, even without the subjects or even the people using the power knowing power is being exercised (Ewick and Sarat, 2004; Bourdieu 1991).

Integrating theorizing on symbolic power helps us answer the question: Can we explain the existence of the coal Commission as a symbolic use of power as a blame avoidance strategy, while the government asserted their own interests?

Examining this question is important from a practical and theoretical standpoint. During this climate crisis, effective action to lessen the emission of greenhouse gases is key in reaching the climate goals and preventing damage done by the anthropogenic threat facing us. Nevertheless, the issues that are being discussed are complex and acting against climate change always comes with costs as well, whether they are societal or economic. The universal nature of this crisis means that we have all become actors. Everyone has a stake in the decisions being made, as they affect us either through the action of elected officials or through their inaction. A fair coal exit deal in Germany is important to achieve the balance between environmental, economic and societal interests of all involved. That is why democratic action is essential in order to leave no one behind. Despite setting up the Commission, the German government chose to ignore substantial parts of its recommendation. This invites the question why a coal Commission was set up at all.

Answering this question poses theoretical relevance as well. In my research, I will introduce theories by Edelman, Hood and Weaver in order to answer the research question. Edelman established the theory on symbolic uses of power while Hood and Weaver make blame avoidance a central theme of their research. A new contribution of this research is the tying together of classic literature on symbolic uses of power with the concept of blame avoidance. My research, in this context, will combine these theories and apply them to a typical case. The German government, as a large, federal democracy in a westernized country, presents an ideal typical case. There is a number of governments like it. Additionally, nearly all governments address the issue of climate change and the continuation of coal power in some way. If we apply the theories mentioned above here, we could deduce results to other large, federal democracies. The concepts mentioned are universally applied, known or unknown, in most political decision-making. Research on links between symbolic uses of

power and blame avoidance could therefore be useful for scholars analyzing policymaking in different nations or contexts. Moreover, these theories are not confined to the context of Germany or a decision on coal power.

I examine whether the German government used the Coal Commission as a symbolic use of power in order to avoid blame during the coal exit decision in three sub-questions: Is there evidence of blame avoidance as the sole motivation? Is there evidence of the government using the Commission only as a symbolic instrument? And lastly, is there evidence that symbolic policy-making was driven by blame avoidance?

To answer these questions, I have conducted a qualitative content analysis of newspaper articles spanning the timeframe from the Commission's establishment in 2018 until the publishing of the draft law in January 2020. Further, I have conducted questionnaires of relevant actors that participated to gain further information. Applying these methods, this thesis finds that while blame avoidance and symbolic uses of power are a constant in political decision-making and in the contact between politicians and the public, these facts are not to be condemned. Multi-faceted decisions often require the use of concepts like these in order to navigate complicated issues and come to a decision where a multitude of actors are involved.

## On blame avoidance and symbolic uses of power

In answering this research question, a look at how policymakers make their decisions is crucial. If we determine what motivations for decision-makers are and how decisions are made, we can draw conclusions regarding the German government's motivations for establishing the coal Commission.

### On blame avoidance theory

Scholars have been examining the decision-making of policymakers for a long time. This complex field has been studied from a variety of areas and viewpoints. Howlett (2013)

states that most times, alterations in policy are incremental. He presents a variety of theories on why decision-makers might shy away from a sudden deviation from the status quo: Earlier studies have suggested that policy-makers could be biased in favor of alternatives that are already known to them or focused on deals and negotiations (Simon, 1955; Lindblom 1959). It was also suggested that structural issues, like the influence of routine and institutionalization, can stop new alternatives from being considered (Clemens and Cook, 1999). More recent studies have pointed towards a combination of structural and behavioral motivations. Craft and Howlett (2013) suggest that policymakers are urged by interests, like lobbyists. Furthermore, their own beliefs can hinder new policy alternatives from being considered (Considine, 2012; Howlett, 2013). While these theories represent a wide variety of attempts to classify the thought processes of policymakers, the focus that is put on structural and behavior motivations negate the influence of policymakers thinking about the outcome of their actions. Ultimately, it always presents a great difficulty for researchers to hypothesize on the thought processes of individuals. Nevertheless, Howlett (2013) attempts to contribute to the literature by offering a theory of outcome-focused decision-makers. He asks what impact policies will have on the policymakers and what outcomes of decisions will be. Howlett determines that risk aversion is a more common motivator than credit-claiming. The concept of risk aversion has been thematized in various research on risk aversion, blame avoidance and negativity bias. This risk-aversion is a key concept in determining if blame avoidance was a factor in decision-making in this case.

One of the authors that established the concept of blame avoidance is Kent Weaver. Chiefly his 1986 article, "The Politics of Blame Avoidance", put blame avoidance theory in the spotlight of decision-making research. Weaver argues that credit claiming, good policy and blame avoidance are all motivations that can influence policy decisions. He further asks the question of which motivation is likely to dominate when they come into conflict. The author determines that blame avoidance as a motivation can lead to different behavioral patterns than the motivations credit-claiming and good policy. Most public servants, according to Weaver, tend to minimize the blame they receive over maximizing the credit they could earn. He

attributes this to voters being more sensitive to what has been done *to* them rather than what has been done *for* them (Weaver, 1986, p. 373). Blame avoidance, according to the author, is the strongest motivation for policymakers. Weaver goes on to establish a guideline to determine if a situation can be classified as one involving the motivation blame avoidance. If one or more of the eight strategies of blame avoidance are employed to avoid or limit blame, it points to that being a predominant motivation. For this case, six of the strategies are relevant. Redefining the issue, where new policy options are introduced, Throwing Good Money after Bad, where resources are provided to prevent constituencies from suffering losses, Passing the Buck, where blame is deflected by forcing others to make politically costly choices, Finding a Scapegoat, where others are blamed, Jumping on the Bandwagon, where a more politically popular alternative is supported and Circling the Wagon, where blame is diffused by spreading it amongst as many policymakers as possible. These six strategies are relevant in this case as there is evidence supporting them being used by the relevant actors. Determining which of Weaver's motivations were at play here can assist in finding if blame avoidance was at play in the case of the German coal exit.

Weaver also argues that the more a government attempts to do, the more likely they are to be held accountable for the negative effects of their policies on affected sectors. This then leads to blame avoidance. Weaver sums up his argumentation by stating that blame avoidance strategies may lead to policies being passed that might otherwise fail, resulting in governments that are fearful of doing wrong and do not try to maximize social welfare (Weaver, 1986). The hope is that social welfare was observed in the decision-making process of the case at hand.

Hood (2007) adds to Weaver's framework by examining what happens when transparency and blame avoidance meet. Hood sees blame avoidance as a driver of political and institutional behavior. In his article, he separates three strategies of blame avoidance: Agency strategies, presentational strategies and policy strategies. Agency strategies are employed when actors attempt to avoid or limit blame by separating responsibility between

different actors. Presentational strategies involve avoiding blame using spin, timing, excuses or distractions. Policy strategies are employed when officeholders or institutions avoid or limit blame by the content of what they do rather than reacting to policies after the fact. The selection of policies to pursue here is characterized by limiting blame rather than claiming credit. The implication is that blame avoidance could be conducted using different methods.

In accordance with Weavers (1986) motivations of policy makers, I expect that the German government was only motivated by blame avoidance. Furthermore, there will be evidence that one or more of the eight blame avoidance strategies according to Weaver were employed. Also supporting this first hypothesis will be evidence of the blame avoidance strategies according to Hood (2007).

Blame avoidance is caused by politicians being dependent on the voters. Their re-election and the success and strength of their party, and thereby their chance to realize the policies they care about, depend on the electorate. As Weaver has stated, "voters are more sensitive to what has been done *to* them than to what has been done *for* them" (Weaver, 1986 p. 373). So, blame-avoidance is the strongest motivator for politicians. Voters remember if they were hurt more than if they benefitted from policies. This leads to politicians avoiding policies and actions that might put blame on them. In the case of the German coal exit, politicians do not want to alienate voters, especially in the coal states. Hurting the coal industry there, where jobs, culture and regions depend on it, might alienate the voters. Therefore, I expect they will try to avoid blame. Politicians do not want to be blamed for a policy that harms key constituents, including interest groups like the coal lobby. They also do not want to be blamed for not dealing with problems that voters deem important, like the climate crisis. It is clear that there are ample opportunities in this case for decision-makers to have engaged in blame-avoidance strategies.

**H1:** There will be evidence of the government employing blame avoidance as the sole motivation.

## On symbolic uses of power

In terms of symbolic power, the key theory is Murray Edelman's work, presented in Ewick and Sarat's 1991 "Hidden in plain view: Murray Edelman in the Law and Society Tradition". Edelman was one of the earliest authors to articulate a constitutive political theory. His ideas influenced many later theories and thereby maintain relevant today. Edelman distinguishes two realms of politics: the realm of organized, rational actors who have first-hand experience and knowledge of politics (often regulated industries, business insiders and political insiders) and the realm of the mass public. The latter is said to be passive, irrational and lacking immediate knowledge and experience of the political world. While the first realm of organized actors "play the game of politics and win", the mass public "sit on the sidelines" and are being reassured by the symbols of democracy (Ewick and Sarat, 2004, p. 443).

Edelman further theorized on citizenry, politics and the use of symbols. According to him, citizens respond to their circumstance of being in the second realm by feeling confusion and ambivalence. This opens them up to manipulation and reassurances via symbols. These symbols can promise participation in the democratic process, equality or fairness. To determine if the Commission functioned as such a symbol is the goal here. Edelman defines symbols as "the articulation of meanings produced in transactions (Ewick and Sarat, 2004, p. 445). Meanings play an important role in Edelman's theory. He sees them as the core of social and political life. Additionally, the social life is being affected by symbols. They, according to Edelman, are more than just a smoke screen – "but often function quite effectively as just that" (Ewick and Sarat, 2004, p. 445).

Edelman also introduces the concept of remoteness. This entails that all events occur at different "distances" from people's lives. This means that the making of laws and decisions happen in a remote zone in relation to the public. Actions that are taken there are only indicated to the public through symbols. These symbols can be controlled by politicians and the media. The more remote the action, the more potent the symbol. Edelman further stresses the role

that ambiguity plays in this process. Making statements and symbols ambiguous ensures that citizens are able to project the meaning onto them that reinforce their own views.

One of Edelman's key concepts is symbolic interaction. Edelman stipulates that ideas and political stances work in relation to one another to deflect and receive meaning. This process works through symbolic interaction, meaning only being able to see the world via generated meanings. The authors stress that that is not a conscious manipulation by politicians, but a natural result of the interaction process, so meaning created through communication.

Edelman distinguishes four styles of political communication in his work: hortatory communication appeals to the public. It is meant to be an apparent call for action and enforce a belief in democratic participation in the public. Legal communication has communicators using definitions that are often incomprehensible to the public. Administrative communication uses an authoritative style which is directed towards a narrow audience and not attempting to legitimize its authority. Finally, the bargaining communication has political communications not communicating with the public but privately, excluding an audience. Edelman further distinguishes three ways of open language. Language can be open to interpretation, its meaning not being fixed. It can also be available and accessible for all. Lastly, language can be open ended, having its meaning appropriated for uses in the future. Did the government employ these concepts during the coal exit decision? Determining this is a goal in testing the second hypothesis.

Edelman's most relevant contribution looking at the question of this thesis is his basis for the theory on symbolic uses of power. Edelman's situational concept of power means that it is exercised using political communication. Political systems as well as the subjects that live within are created through interactions, characterized by the control of the rulers over symbols. Not only are they created through interactions, according to Edelman's theory, citizens experiences with politics are what produces power and meaning. These experiences are the political communication and language presented above. So, for Edelman, power is created through symbols. In 1991, Pierre Bourdieu expanded on this idea. While he stresses

Edelman's point about citizens acquiescence in relation to political power, he defines symbolic power as invisible, to the subjects as well as to those that exercise it. It is clear that the theory on symbolic uses of power are thorough. They stipulate that symbolic uses of power are created by interactions of the powerful with its citizens. These interactions use symbols conveyed through political communication, often unnoticed by the citizens as well as the rulers.

In this thesis, I expect to find evidence that the Commission was only used as a symbolic instrument for the Government's aims. Further, I will examine whether the government used the political communication styles and open language methods as stipulated by Edelman. These expectations are reasonable as Edelman stipulates that symbols are caused by the interaction between the two realms of organized actors and mass public. The mass public is generally reassured by symbolic displays of democracy and addressing climate change is very complicated, which is why they may rely more on symbols. I expect the Commission to have functioned as just that in this case, as it contained the involved actors, suggesting a democratic process, while the compromise was then not taken over into law. I expect to find evidence of Edelman's open language methods and political communication styles. This can be expected as they are presented in Edelman's works as parts of the common process of the interaction between politicians and the public. Lastly, Edelman and Bourdieu both state that the use of symbols is part of the interactions between the two realms and often unnoticed by citizens and decision-makers. A thorough study of the case can be expected to bring this process to light. In this case, politicians want to make voters who are affected by the coal exit feel listened to. Further, many people care about climate change. To make these voters feel like their concerns are being taken seriously, the government used symbolism to create the impression of a democratic process.

**H2:** There will be evidence of the government using the Commission only as a symbolic instrument to suggest participation.

## Combining the theories

Furthermore, combining the theories by Weaver and Hood with that of Edelman will determine whether the German government did employ the Commission as a symbolic instrument in order to avoid blame during the coal exit decision. I expect this hypothesis to be true if the first hypotheses prove true, as this hypothesis is based on the same assumptions. If I have determined that there is evidence of the government using blame avoidance as the sole motivation and evidence of the government using the Commission only as a symbolic instrument, I can determine if there is a connection between the two hypotheses. It is reasonable to expect the two to be connected, as there must be a motivation for the government to employ a symbolic instrument, if that was indeed the case. By using symbolism, politicians were able to redirect blame to the coal commission and not to themselves. If they were criticized for their handling of the coal exit, politicians could point to the Commission as the responsible entity.

**H3:** The government did employ the Commission as a symbolic instrument in order to avoid blame during the coal exit decision.

## Data

The data that is necessary in order to answer the research question was gathered from two sources. Firstly, a content analysis of newspaper articles was conducted. Secondly, a questionnaire was carried out. The aim with these was to apply the aforementioned theories to the collected data in order to determine if the hypotheses are true or false.

## Newspaper Articles

For the newspaper article content analysis, two newspapers were chosen as sources for the articles. The aim was to choose two papers of which one is more conservative and one more progressive in order to obtain information that is representative of a broad range of

viewpoints on climate change. The Süddeutsche Zeitung (SZ) and the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (FAZ) were selected. They fit the criteria of being slightly more progressive and slightly more conservative respectively but are both reputable news sources with a similar circulation. Both also have the advantage of having an accessible online archive of printed articles.

Articles were selected to maximize representativeness. Choosing the articles, the aim was to trace a timeline from the Commission's establishment in 2018 until the first draft of the law was passed by the cabinet in January 2020. To maintain equal weight of the timeframes, five articles were to be chosen per newspaper for 2018, when the Commission was established, and ten articles per newspaper were chosen for the years 2019 and 2020, when the Commission announced its decision and the law was drafted. Using the online archives of the SZ and FAZ and the search term "Kohlekommission" (Coal Commission) for the respective timeframes in the resorts economic affairs and politics yielded relevant articles, of which 25 were chosen for each paper (N=50; a complete list of all articles can be found in Appendix 2).

Conducting a content analysis is a standard instrument in social research (Mayring 2014). When conducting a qualitative content analysis, the goal is to "maintain the strengths of quantitative content analysis to develop techniques of systematic, qualitative oriented text analysis" (Mayring 2014, p. 39). To conduct the content analysis, a category system was established. The categories represented the theories used. The categories for the corresponding theories were titled "Edelman", "Weaver" and "Hood". The complete codebook used can be found in Appendix 1.

In the category "Edelman", the key concepts are Political Communication and Open Language. For the concept Political Communication, Edelman distinguishes the forms hortatory, legal, administrative and bargaining communication styles. These styles will be applied to statements made by decision-makers that are found in the articles. In the concept of Open Language, Edelman describes language that can be open to interpretation, accessible or open-ended. Like the first concept, this concept can be applied to statements made by decision-makers to determine what type of language is used.

The concept relating to Hood is his Blame Avoidance Strategies. Hood discerns three strategies of blame avoidance: Agency strategies, presentational strategies and policy strategies. Evidence in the articles that these strategies were employed will be coded with this code.

Under the category “Weaver”, there are two relevant codes. First, the motivations of policymakers are separated into credit-claiming, blame-avoiding and non-electoral motivations, like good policy. The second code is Blame Avoidance Strategies, according to Weaver. Weaver presents eight strategies of blame avoidance. These concepts will be operationalized by applying them to the articles and finding evidence therein that points to which motivation policymakers possess and, if the motivation is blame avoidance, which strategy was used.

By coding the articles for these key concepts, it can be determined if the hypotheses hold up when applying the theories to the data at hand. All of the codes are summarized in the codebook available in the appendix.

## Questionnaires

The second source of data are the questionnaires that were conducted. A qualitative approach was chosen in order to gain thorough insights into the topic. The respondents were chosen using a non-probability sampling approach. The target population was made up of individuals that are knowledgeable regarding the establishment of the coal Commission, its decision-making process or the drafting of the coal-exit law. It was therefore compiled of members of the Commission and Members of the Bundestag from the government or the opposition, mainly those that have a policy focus on environmental, employment or energy policy. From this target population, voluntary sampling was conducted in combination with snowball sampling. This enabled individuals with a high knowledge base on the topic to participate. In total, seven respondents participated in the questionnaire. All respondents were anonymized for this research. They included, in terms of Commission members, a negotiator for a Commission member from the chamber of commerce, members of an energy think tank,

an ecological institute, a mayor from a town in a coal region and the chairman of a large German environmental organization. Two members of the Bundestag opposition also participated, even though they were not represented in the Commission. A list of participants can be found in Data Appendix 4 . In terms of questions, I followed Sreejesh et al.'s principle on developing questionnaire designs: The respondent defines what you can do (Sreejesh et al. 2014). Looking at the target population, it is clear that the individuals targeted are knowledgeable regarding the types of words used in the context of policymaking and decision making and regarding the relevant concepts. A higher degree of freedom for participants ensured that there is no bias for response ranges and gave the participants the liberty to answer at their will, even if this does affect the ability to compare results across samples. The questionnaire can be found in Data Appendix 3. The questionnaire was distributed via E-Mail in order to directly reach the target population. I analyzed the results using the same method used for the operationalization of the articles, coding them using the concepts found in the theories.

## Analysis

In order to answer the research question, the data collected will be analyzed hypothesis-by-hypothesis. For the first hypothesis, the relevant concepts include those categorized under the title “Weaver” and “Hood”. The second hypothesis thematizes concepts related to “Edelman” and the third hypotheses will combine the findings of the first two hypotheses. The data has been coded in accordance with these categories. The analysis will now present the concepts found in the collected data and determine if the proposed hypotheses hold up.

### Hypothesis I

The first hypothesis states that the motivations of policymakers were solely that of blame avoidance. To begin, even the media finds the decision to disregard the Coal

Commission's recommendations anomalous and suggest that the reason may be blame avoidance. The SZ asks why the government established the Commission and not simply made a law. The answer, in their opinion, lies with a lesson learned from exiting nuclear energy in Germany: Compensation claims from energy suppliers are to be avoided (SZ, 29.01.2019). If they are blamed for starting a coal exit and shutting down plants, operators are free to sue for compensation. As policymakers, like humans generally, are risk-averse, the threat of compensation payments loomed large for them. Avoiding being blamed for being guilty of accepting large compensations could have been a motivation here. Risk-aversion affected the decision-making in this case. On June 26<sup>th</sup>, 2019, government spokesman Steffen Seibert is quoted in the SZ as saying that, for the federal government, it is now "first and foremost a matter of reliability", which means implementing the recommendations of the Commission, as this expressed a compromise for the whole society (SZ, 26.06.2019). This points to blame avoidance being a motivation. Weaver (1986) distinguished three motivations: blame avoidance, good policy and credit-claiming. Evidence for the motivations of the Government could be found, firstly, in the Questionnaires. When asked why the Commission was established, one participant stated that the government did not have the guts to decide it for themselves. They stated that there was no decision-making without dissatisfaction on some sides. As the two governing parties had different ideas on how to handle the coal exit, they created this Commission in order to avoid blame. They called it a "pseudo-legitimation". They also stated that the ministry of the economy was the leading force in creating the law (Questionnaire I). Another participant corroborated these claims, stating that the coalition could not agree on an exit date, the way to reach it or necessary measures, therefore handing the task over to the Commission (Questionnaire II). We can infer a strong risk avoidance on the side of the government from these statements. That speaks for the motivation "blame avoidance" as distinguished by Weaver being present.

Evidence for Weaver's blame avoidance motivation was further found in the articles, like an FAZ article from June 7<sup>th</sup>, 2018. The paper wrote that many of the Commissions previously established by the government are attempts to postpone a difficult problem and

outsource the search for a solution. Additionally, the SZ wrote, on October 13<sup>th</sup> of the same year, that the coal Commission is meant to prevent the impression that the coal exit is conducted without consulting the affected people and groups, especially in east Germany. The “Neue Bundesländer” in the east had a hard time with little support after Germanys reunification and are also especially affected if a coal exit is conducted, so the impression that the decision is made over their heads was to be avoided. This speaks for the government wanting to avoid blame. While the Commission was finishing their work, the SZ quotes Hubert Weiger, chairman of the environmental group BUND, as saying that “it is a very serious situation. We are currently discussing the matter as if the economy needs to be protected from the effects of a premature coal exit” (SZ, 25.01.2019). This points to the government being focused on the economic impacts of a coal exit and wanting to avoid blame for disadvantaging the economy. It is clear that the government is aware of the impression that not implementing this compromise would have and that that could open the government up to blame. When the draft coal exit law is presented in January 2020, the government also portrays blame avoidance motivations. On January 24<sup>th</sup>, the SZ writes about the government stressing the advantages of Datteln 4, a newly-build coal power plant that is not being shut down, against the recommendations of the coal Commission. They want to justify this discrepancy. This is also the case in an article from the FAZ on March 7<sup>th</sup>, 2020. Here, a spokesperson of the German Energy Agency DENA says, in support of economic minister Altmaier (CDU), that the Commission’s compromise followed a “shutdown logic” and did not take economic feasibility into account. In the differences in the law, Altmaier is allegedly attempting to remedy this (FAZ, 07.03.2020). It is clear that blame avoidance is the predominant motivation of the ones stipulated by Weaver (1986).

Besides blame avoidance being an apparent motivation, there is also evidence that good policy was an incentive for policy-makers in drafting the law. The SZ writes, on October 13<sup>th</sup>, 2018, that the federal government aims to help employees that lost their jobs through the coal exit with training opportunities, getting new industries to settle in the affected regions, shortening approval times for projects there and spending 1,5 billion euros in this legislative period to do so (SZ, 13.10.2018). If that is the case, helping the regions was a motivating factor

here. A month later, the SZ reported on a letter written by the minister presidents of east German federal states that criticized the ongoing Commission's negotiations for containing too much about the coal exit and too little about structural change (SZ, 26.11.2018). This points to that criticism being a motivator for the government to focus more on structural change in its decisions to support the affected regions. This may have been done to avoid blame in parts, but the pressure from minister presidents to improve their states situation stemmed from the motivation to create good policies for their constituents as well. A further indication towards motivations other than blame avoidance stems from an article in the FAZ. They report on the obligation of lawmakers to adhere to international law, european law as well as constitutional law (FAZ 05.04.2019). This affects the laws that are passed. When the draft law was made public, the papers analyzed reported that minister of the economy Altmaier defends the plan to start up Datteln 4 by arguing that it is better to run this plant than older plants. He also mentions supply security, especially regarding the shutdown of the last German nuclear plants in 2022 (FAZ, 12.01.2020). This points to the predominant motivation here being the production of good or effective policies, not blame avoidance. On February 8<sup>th</sup>, 2020, the FAZ further writes that the government was right in not following the Commission's suggestion to shut down Datteln 4, as it replaces older, CO2 emission-heavy plants. Also, the government would have needed to pay the operator high compensations (FAZ, 08.02.2020). Avoiding this was a motivator for not following the compromise. It can be argued that there are multiple factors that play into the motivations for differing from the Commissions compromise.

Now that there is evidence of blame avoidance as a motivation, I can employ Weavers eight strategies of blame avoidance in order to see what form it takes in this case. Evidence of six of the eight strategies could be found in the articles. Lawmakers can be observed attempting the strategy of "redefine the issue" when the SZ reports on minister Altmaier on January 21<sup>st</sup>, 2020. Altmaier is quoted as saying that gas power plants must also play a role in the energy supply and that the government wants to support them when questioned about coal plants. He also employs this strategy as reported by the FAZ on January 22, 2020 when defending his plans to start up Datteln 4 by saying generated emissions can be equalize by

taking the emissions from the market elsewhere. The second strategy is “Throwing Good Money after Bad”. This can be observed in coal mining areas being favored in the future and them being provided educational and business opportunities (SZ, 13.10.2018). Further, coal regions, like those in east Germany, are titled “fear regions” for the government. Large parts of the population vote the right wing AfD instead of CDU or SPD. To support those populations and not estrange them further, coal workers will receive “adjustment money”, plus money for the affected regions (SZ, 17.01.2020). Evidence can also be found of “Passing the Buck”, when Commissions are described as an attempt by politicians to delay a problem and outsource the search for a solution (FAZ, 07.06,2018), and of “Finding a Scapegoat”, when the DENA spokesperson blames the Commission for not focusing enough on economic feasibility and says the law draft must remedy that (FAZ, 07.03.2020). Evidence for the strategy of “Passing the Buck” is also clear in the questionnaires. Respondents state that the Commission was established because the government did not have the guts to do it themselves, as dissatisfaction would be ensured (Questionnaire I). The fifth strategy of blame avoidance can be seen in an SZ article from January 24<sup>th</sup>, 2019. In a debate about the coal exit, chancellor Merkel is quoted as saying that the Commissions compromise applies. A spokesman adds that for the government, it is first and foremost about reliability, which means following the Commission’s suggestions. This is evidence of supporting a politically popular alternative. The sixth strategy, “Circling the Wagon” entails spreading blame among as many policymakers as possible. This can be observed in an article by the SZ, where it is written that having the Commission suggest contractual negotiations with operators about compensations opens up the possibility for lawmakers (SZ, 29.01.2019). The FAZ further presents a situation where the ministry of economic affairs responds to criticism that emissions trading is not sufficiently observed in the decision by referring to an EU plan to reduce redundant CO2 certificates (FAZ, 22.01.2019). There are evidently ample cues of the blame avoidance strategies that were employed, knowingly or unknowingly.

Continuing with blame avoidance strategies as stipulated by Hood (2007), there is evidence of agency, policy and presentational strategies being employed. The government

has attempted to limit blame by allocating responsibility to different institutions or persons firstly, by outsourcing the search of a solution to the coal exit problem to a Commission (FAZ, 07.06.2018). Secondly, by referring to EU regulations when questioned about aspects of the draft law (FAZ, 22.11.2019) and thirdly, by blaming the Commission for not taking economic feasibility enough into account, which has to be remedied by the law (FAZ, 07.03.2020). Additionally, there is conflict within the government. The SPD is reported to warn its coalition partner CDU/CSU to adhere to the Commission's compromise. If not, "that would be a clear violation of the coalition contract and would lead to a loss of credibility" (SZ, 01.06.2020). Two of the respondents also saw the Commission as a way of finding a solution when the governing coalition was unable or unwilling to do so, allocating responsibility to it (Questionnaires I, II). All these facts point towards agency strategies being used here. Further, policy strategies are apparent. The government is attempting to avoid blame by what they do when they establish the Commission in an attempt to outsource the problem (FAZ, 07.06.2020). This is also meant to prevent the impression that the coal exit does not regard those affected by it, especially in east Germany (SZ, 13.10.2018), thereby losing more voters to the AfD (SZ, 17.01.2020). It is also aimed at preventing compensation claims from operators (SZ, 27.01.2019). In order to not be blamed for these issues, the government established the Commission. Here, the government is producing policies that are aimed at avoiding blame. Finally, presentational strategies are employed. In relation to Datteln 4, representatives of the government claim that it cannot be shut down for legal or financial reasons (FAZ, 13.11.2019, 12.01.2020; SZ, 17.01.2020, 24.01.2020). These argumentations can be seen as distractions or excuses on underlying reasons. Further, when facing criticism regarding the draft coal exit law, Altmaier refers to the advantages of gas plants instead of coal plants, distracting from the criticism (SZ, 21.01.2020). Here, presentational strategies like excuses are apparent.

Looking at the evidence at hand, it is clear that the motivations of policymakers in the decision around the coal exit were indeed those of blame avoidance. Nevertheless, it is not the only motivation. Creating a sound policy that takes care of citizens in the affected regions also seemed to be a common driver in creating legislation the way the government did. It can

be concluded for the first hypothesis that blame avoidance is not the sole motivation of the government in this decision.

## Hypothesis II

The second hypothesis stipulated that the government did use the Commission only as a symbolic instrument. In order to determine if there is evidence of a symbolic role of the Commission, the first code that is meant to produce evidence to support or negate this thesis is Symbolism. Then, the theories stipulated by Edelman will be applied to the collected data.

Most respondents in the questionnaires said that the key characteristics of the Commission's decision were maintained in the law. One participant stated that, because the Commission's decision was passed 27 to 1, it created a binding obligation for the government. Nevertheless, discrepancies during implementation were unavoidable. In this case, the government wanted to reach out to companies and employees of coal plants as well as wanting to limit the necessary financial obligations. All this speaks for the Commission not only having a symbolic impact (Questionnaire V).

Nevertheless, in the articles, there is evidence that speaks for a symbolic role of the Commission. In 2018, the SZ wrote that many Commissions are established to delay problems and outsource the search for a solution (SZ, 07.06.2018). Additionally, they wrote that the coal Commission can only give recommendations to the government. It does not have budgetary resources and cannot speak to potential investors (SZ, 26.11.2018). A further point towards the symbolism of the Commission is that there were no budgetary policymakers, nor members of the finance ministry represented (FAZ, 14.02.2019). For a serious, feasible result, this would have been key. From an environmentalist standpoint, the work of the Commission can also be criticized. It can only make suggestions, implementation is up to politicians (SZ, 26.01.2019). This speaks towards a role of the Commission that is not deciding in policy questions. On September 17<sup>th</sup>, 2018, Michael Vassiliadis, union head and member of the Commission, says that during the Commissions decision-making process, there is the appearance of back-room deals (SZ, 17.09.2018). This points towards the process not being genuine. This argument is

supported in an article the FAZ published on January 28<sup>th</sup>, 2019. There it is stated that the coal states are the profiteers of the compromise. They demanded advantages, which they were granted, and thereby undermined the Commission's work. The FAZ writes that, after the Commission's decision was announced, researches at the IFO institute determined that the coal exit could be equalized by imports of coal energy from Poland and Czechia. The FAZ writes that economists spoke of symbolic politics (FAZ, 05.06.2019). Similar reactions were expressed towards the coal exit law. Kai Niebert of the German nature conservation ring is quoted in the SZ as saying the coal exit plan was "climate political nonsense and energy political insanity" (SZ, 21.01.2020). The next day, the SZ reports on eight members of the Commission that distanced themselves from the implementation of the coal exit, calling it problematic from a climate political, but also from an energy-political perspective. The paper adds that if eight members of the Commission denounce the compromise, it is worthless, as it does not represent society, but the interests of the economy, unions and politicians (SZ, 22.01.2020). The draft law not following the Commission's compromise points to it being symbolic. Indications towards the Commission having a symbolic role can also be found in the questionnaires. One participant stated that the government did employ the Commission as a "pseudo-legitimation" for the decision-making process. The same participant stated that the actor with the most influence in the Commission was chairman Pofalla. They stated that Pofalla was asked by the chancellery and chancellor Merkel to lead the Commission to a successful conclusion. He also helped implement wishes by the chancellery to stop unions and economic representatives choosing the compensation payments. Also, the respondent stated that Pofalla had his interest as member of the board of the Deutsche Bahn AG in mind. Therefore, Datteln 4, which is meant to produce energy for the Bahn, and more train infrastructure in coal regions were part of the decision in the coal exit (Questionnaire I). A participant that is a member of the opposition stated in their questionnaire that the Commission was created with the goal to foot the discourse about the coal exit on a broader societal consensus. The goal was, according to them, missed already by excluding the opposition from the Commission, as this undermined its democratic legitimacy. The results of the Commission can therefore only be

seen as suggestions without binding effect. They also stated that they did not understand why the Commission was necessary, as the normal parliamentary law-making process includes society, scientists and interest groups. The respondent also criticized the draft law for not being an effective result (Questionnaire III). Another respondent stated that the Commission was established to assuage the conflict around coal power that has been active for years. This points to the Commission only being an instrument to evade that conflict (Questionnaire V). All this speaks for a symbolic role of the Commission.

But there can also be arguments made towards the Commission not being symbolic. The FAZ writes, in June 2018, that the government wants to plan the coal exit in a law and that the Commission is meant to make suggestions for that (FAZ, 07.06.2018). Suggestions are not binding. The same month, the FAZ reports on discussions in the government about what resorts would be part of the Commission, who would organize and who would lead (FAZ, 01.06.2018). A discussion like that would not be necessary if the Commission just had symbolic value. In the same article, the FAZ reports on previous Commissions, like that for the exit from nuclear power, that were successful in producing societal consensus and a law (FAZ, 01.06.2018). In April 2019, the FAZ stresses the advantages of consensual results as creating legal certainty, eliminating the need for long-term administrative procedures and processes and enabling innovation. Nevertheless, they state that decisions must be attributed to lawmakers in a democracy, thereby the place to debate and decide the coal exit must be the Bundestag (FAZ, 05.04.2019). A Commission that had law-making powers would therefore go against the democratic proceedings.

Edelman's theory can be leveraged to further inspect the materials for symbolic use of policy, namely his guidelines on political communication styles. There is evidence of the government using the *bargaining style*, meaning acting privately, without involving the public. The SZ writes that the Commission suffered through negotiations without many results when suddenly, an exit plan stood, forced by chairman Pofalla. This happened after he had talks with the government. No-one else in the Commission is said to have known about the plan

(SZ, 17.09.2018). Here, communication is being held from the public as well as other members of the Commission. Additionally, the SZ wrote on January 5<sup>th</sup>, 2019, that chancellor Merkel invited minister presidents of the coal states and the chairmen of the Commission to a private talk about the state of the negotiations and the further process. These talks were also behind closed doors, speaking for the use of a bargaining communication style. In other words, the distance between *organized actors* and the *mass public* is maintained rather than diminished through the establishment of the Coal Commission.

One participant in the questionnaires stated that there was a structural lack of transparency (Questionnaire III). These factors point towards a government that does not communicate transparently with its citizens. Further, there is evidence of the government using the legal communication style, which employs definitions and commands often incomprehensible to the public. On November 13<sup>th</sup>, 2019, the FAZ writes about a speaker of the ministry of economics that is confronted with the inconsistency of starting Datteln 4 against the Commission's recommendations. The speaker only said that "law and order" command that it does open (FAZ, 13.11.2019). The FAZ also finds issue with a very vaguely formulated clause in the draft law regarding emission's trading (FAZ, 22.11.2019). These can be seen as uses of legal communication

The last code that can assist in determining whether there is a case of symbolic use of power here is the use of open language as stipulated by Edelman. Open language is the use of political language that is open to interpretation, open-ended or available to all. The government did use language that was open to interpretation firstly, when establishing the Commission. The goal was to provide "suggestions" for the coal exit (FAZ, 07.06.2018). It is not clearly defined what that entails. Secondly, the FAZ writes that, regarding emissions trading, CO2 licenses of shut-down plants can be deleted if the government chooses to do so (FAZ, 22.11.2019). Here, the language is unclear and open to interpretation as well. Open-ended language was also employed. The FAZ writes that, when establishing the Commission, the tasks of the Commission changed from those planned in the coalition agreement. There,

the primary goals were the climate goals 2020 and 2030. In the appointment of the Commission, the first three goals are about employment and structural change, only then about climate and coal exit (FAZ, 30.05.2018). Open-ended phrasings were used to enable a change of focus from climate to structural change. Open-ended language is also employed when Merkel invites coal state minister presidents and chairmen of the Commission to a talk with the goal to talk about “the state of negotiations and the further process” (SZ, 05.01.2019). That is general phrasing that can be interpreted as wanted in the future. Lastly, the draft law states that it can be expected that an additional coal plant could start up in 2020 (SZ, 24.01.2020). This is held in a hypothetical as to enable the option, should it be necessary in the future. This speaks towards the open-ended communication style being used.

To conclude on hypothesis two, there is evidence that the government did use the Commission as a symbolic instrument. Several of the sources investigated speak for a symbolic role of the Commission and the government did employ political communication styles and open language as stipulated by Edelman. Nevertheless, there is also evidence against a symbolic role of the Commission, mainly its non-legislative role and the compromise being considered in the law at all. Therefore, hypotheses two can be falsified as the government did seem to use the Commission as a symbolic instrument, but not only as that. It was also used to providing societal consensus and helping to create a law.

### Hypothesis III

The third hypothesis consisted of the claim that the government did employ the Commission as a symbolic instrument in order to avoid blame during the coal exit decision. I have determined that the policymakers in this case did employ strategies of blame avoidance, but that other motivations were also at play. Weaver theorized that blame avoidance leads to different behavioral patterns than other motivations, like credit-claiming and good policy. In the case at hand, the same actions by policymaker can be made examples for their blame avoidance and for motivations of creating a good policy. An example is Datteln 4. Did the government want to avoid blame for shutting down a new coal plant or did they want to avoid

high compensation payment to operators? Both motivations seem likely. Weaver further writes that blame avoidance leads to policies being chosen that might otherwise not have been chosen (Weaver, 1986). Here, both motivations can apply. Therefore Datteln 4 might have been started up even without a blame avoidance motivation. Additionally, policymakers are now receiving blame for starting up the plant. Blame was unavoidable here, either from the side of environmentalists or operators.

Weaver continues with stating that the more a government attempts to do, the more likely they are to be held accountable for the negative effects of the policies on affected sectors (Weaver, 1986). In the case of the coal exit decision, there was special care taken not to disadvantage the affected sectors. Structural change was declared the number one issue, even behind environmental protection (SZ, 13.10.2018). The government does attempt to do a lot with exiting an important energy source, the SZ wrote that the country was facing one of the most difficult decisions of this time, torn between climate protection and industry politics (SZ, 25.10.2018). That means the government is more likely to be held accountable for negative effects of their policies on affected sectors. The government did want to avoid being blamed for leaving the coal regions behind, but in doing that served the people of those regions. In this decision, there was a balance to be achieved between protecting these coal jobs, sectors and regions and between environmental issues caused by coal. A perfect compromise here is unlikely. Like one respondent summed up in the questionnaire: Someone is always dissatisfied (Questionnaire I). Weaver's argumentation that blame avoidance strategies may lead to policies being passed that might otherwise fail, resulting in governments that are fearful of doing wrong and do not try to maximize social welfare, can also be applied to this case. Here, the greatest evidence for the government attempting to avoid blame can be found in the support of coal regions. The coal exit would have happened whether blame avoidance was an issue or not. In the form with which it was passed, blame avoidance did play into what the decisions would look like. Nevertheless, the government did employ blame avoidance to maximize social welfare in the regions. Blame avoidance did not get in the way of social welfare here. The decision can be, and was, criticized for leaving environmental

issues as a second priority. Here, social welfare was affected in terms of protecting citizens from the long-term effects of climate change. Yet, the coal exit was decided, and coal power is being phased out, so what maximizes social welfare here is a complicated issue.

Looking further at the symbolic uses of power, Edelman theorized that citizens are unsure, confused and ambivalent, which makes them susceptible for symbols that can promise participation in the democratic process, equality or fairness. In this case, the coal Commission did represent a symbol for the participation of all those affected on the coal exit process. The normal legislative process would have included the affected groups and would have been democratically legitimate (Questionnaire III). Nevertheless, the Commission still did work out a compromise over the course of seven months that was considered in the draft law for the most part. If the deliberations would have been this thorough in the legislative is a question that remains open. The Commission therefore took on a symbolic role as well as a legislative role, reassuring those affected by the coal exit about their participation as well as serving as a groundwork for the legislation. Edelman further talks about symbolic interaction and how it is not a conscious manipulation by politicians, but a natural result of the interaction process. Political communication and open language do help to exercise power, but, as Bourdieu stressed, symbolic power is often not noticeable to either those affected or those wielding it. If the Commission was meant to take on a symbolic role here, the symbolism could have gone unnoticed by policymakers as well as citizens.

Looking at the evidence presented above, it can be determined that the government did not employ the Commission as a symbolic instrument in order to avoid blame in policymaking. Politicians did not use the Commission to have someone to direct blame towards instead of them, but rather used it to produce a groundwork for the law. Changes from the Commission's compromise could be explained with blame avoidance, but other motivations were also at play. They employed the Commission to ease the political conflict around the coal exit and to make it seem like the afflicted are more involved that it would have seemed in the usual legislative process. The government did set the law draft's focus on structural change and the coal regions in order to avoid blame there. Yet, in politics, blame is unavoidable. This

is why it is such a prevalent motivation in blame avoidance theories, an even stronger one than claiming credit or creating good policies. Here, the criticism on the difference between the Commission's decision and the law was reinforced because the Commission's decision was often seen as more than what it was: a suggestion. The decisions made by Commissions are not legally binding because in a democracy, the legislative process necessitates the involvement of the Bundestag, Bundesrat and the government. This is defined in Article 70 of the German constitution. Therefore, the coal Commission can only have suggestive force.

The proposed law will still be going through the Bundestag and Bundesrat. This is where legislation is actually created, not in a Commission. That is the democratic process, involving elected representatives of the people.

## Conclusion

In this thesis, the aim was threefold: To determine if there was evidence of the government employing blame avoidance as the sole motivation, to determine if there was evidence of the government using the Commission only as a symbolic instrument and to determine if they are related: Is there evidence that the government employed the Commission as a symbolic instrument in order to avoid blame? I have found that policymakers did indeed employ motivations of blame avoidance, but not exclusively. Hypothesis one is therefore partially supported. Blame avoidance was not the sole motivation. In the case of prioritizing the coal regions in the decision-making process, blame avoidance did play a predominant role. But the decision included many other elements. The coal plants will still be shut down, showcasing that protecting the regions was not the only motivation. There was also evidence that the government did employ symbolic policymaking. Sources point towards the Commission having a symbolic role. Hypothesis two is therefore supported. Concepts from the theories by Edelman could be found. Evidence that the government employed the Commission as a symbolic instrument order to avoid blame could be found in parts. While the government did employ some blame avoidance strategies, including letting the affected people and sectors

participate in part of the decision-making process, the Commission was always meant to only make suggestions. Considerations and trade-offs are unavoidable during the legislative process. In combination with symbolic uses of power, which is often not noticeable as an automatic process stemming from symbolic interaction, blame avoidance as it was applied here can be seen as part of the usual process of representing citizens and creating laws. Looking at the results of these hypotheses, I can determine that the government did not employ the Commission as a symbolic instrument in order to avoid blame during the coal exit decision. Hypothesis three is therefore not supported. Blame avoidance and symbolic power were never the only motivations for policymakers in this case. While the Commission functioned as a symbol of participation for affected actors, it was never meant to take over the legislative decision-making process and therefore function as a scapegoat for the government to avoid blame.

These results showcase that the democratic process is working as intended. Involving actors in the decision-making process is important and relevant, but the legislative has to be the decision-making power. The Bundestag and Bundesrat are democratically elected to represent the people and their will. In a democracy, only they should make the decisions. Commissions like the coal Commission are useful for gaining insight into the topic and on the different views that are part of the decision and the government should (and did) take its results into account. The final decision should, nevertheless, lie with the elected officials.

It is important to keep in mind that this is only a small study on one case. Additionally, motivations for policy decisions can only be interpreted on the basis of publicized material. What intrinsic motivations of government officials are often remains unclear and can only be conjectured.

From a theoretical standpoint, the aim was to present theories by Weaver, Hood and Edelman and apply them to a typical case. This was successful here. Whether there can be observations made for other large, federal, westernized nations is open. While the exit from coal power is a theme that is being discussed in numerous countries, the role that coal takes

in each country and the actors involved differ. Nevertheless, applying the theories used is very much possible and should be encouraged for other cases. In terms of the theories that were used, there was no aim to add to the already established theories, as they have been successfully employed in research for decades and still hold up today.

In terms of the case at hand, the goal was to determine if the action that was taken was indeed democratic. This was important in terms of ensuring effective action in fighting climate change. The question was if the government did act effectively and democratically. I have determined that it did. The Commission's decision was only meant to be a suggestion. The groundwork of the decision was taken over in the law, so relevant actors were considered. As the law still has to pass the Bundestag and Bundesrat, democratic passage of the law will be ensured.

To collect the data necessary to come to these conclusions, I conducted a qualitative content analysis of newspaper articles tracing a timeline from the establishment of the coal Commission in 2018 to the drafting of the coal exit law in 2020. Two newspapers were used, one more conservative and one more progressive. They were coded according to the concepts from the theories. I also conducted qualitative questionnaires using non-probability, voluntary and snowball sampling. The results were also coded according to the concepts from the theories.

Difficulties in reaching the research design were posed by the articles as well as by the questionnaire. As qualitative content analysis is not a standardized instrument, it had to be fitted to the case at hand. The approach for analyzing the data had to be made clear to ensure replicability. The categorization of concepts in this thesis alleviated this threat. Nevertheless, using newspaper comes with disadvantages as well. Newspapers, even ones that follow guidelines of objectivity, still report only stories that they deem newsworthy or important. What is not important to them, but would be important for research like this, might have been left out. Additionally, using more newspapers would have ensured a more even view, but could not be accomplished due to the scope of this thesis. In terms of the questionnaires, a weakness lies

in the open-question format. While this can also be seen as a strength, because participants are free to inform on what they deem important to a degree, it resulted in some questionnaires that were not as useful for this research as others.

Despite these disadvantages, the research design overall posed a strong method for answering the research question. A qualitative content analysis has the advantages of quantitative content analyses, but also enables the researcher to develop new techniques of systematic text analysis. This allowed for flexible research and for the text to be analyzed within its context as a newspaper article. When properly conducted, using categorization methods to ensure replicability, this method is very transparent for further researchers. The questionnaires were also a strong method for gathering data of affected actors. Questionnaires like this have the advantage of being cheap, relatively fast and easy to anonymize the participants. In general, the mixture of the two data collection methods ensured different insights into the same topic, providing an ideal mix of methods to answer the research question.

For future research and practice, researchers could work on making the theories more applicable to real life cases. These classic theories have a long history of being tried and tested. Nevertheless, applying the theories to more cases to determine if the current or previous governments or decision-makers are acting democratically and what methods are used in making decisions could be beneficial in ensuring democratic principles are being held up. While the theories used were mostly from the 20<sup>th</sup> century, more research on them could help to bring them into the 21<sup>st</sup> century by refining them to fit this time or developing new theories on their basis with modern concepts in mind. This could give us even more fitting theories.

For practical applications, looking at this case, policymakers should be aware of their inclination towards blame avoidance and the use of symbols. If they develop an awareness of where these concepts stem from and in what ways they express themselves, it could enable them to adjust their policy-decisions away from these motivations and towards more democratic policies for all.

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## Appendix

### Appendix 1: Codebook

#### Category: Edelman

**Symbolism:** Describes references to the commission being a symbolic entity.

Code	When to use
Symbolism	When evidence is mentioned for or against the commission being used only as a symbolic instrument

**PoliticalComm:** This code describes four styles of political communication as theorized by Edelman (Ewick, Sarat 2004 p. 456): The hortatory style, an appeal to the public, the legal style, consisting of definition and commands (incomprehensible to the public), the administrative style, authoritative, and the bargaining style, privately and excluding an audience.

Code	When to use
PoliticalComm (hortatory)	When political communicators appeal to the public, enforcing a belief in democratic participation
PoliticalComm (legal)	When political communicators use definitions and commands, often incomprehensible to the public
PoliticalComm (administrative)	When political communicators use authoritative style, being directed towards a narrow audience and making no effort to legitimize its authority
PoliticalComm (bargaining)	When political communicators do not communicate with the public but act privately, excluding an audience.

**OpenLanguage:** This code is applied when actors show one of Edelman's ways of open language. Is the language used by actors open to interpretation, available/accessible or open ended?

Code	When to use
OpenLanguage (interpretation)	When the language's meaning is not fixed, open to interpretation
OpenLanguage (available)	When the language is available or accessible for all
OpenLanguage (openended)	When the language's meaning can be appropriated for unplanned uses in the future, open-ended.

Category: Hood

**BlameAvoidance:** This code is applied when actors use blame avoidance strategies as theorized by Hood (2007, p. 199).

Code	When to use
BlameAvoidance (agency)	When actors attempt to avoid or limit blame by allocating responsibility between different institutions and persons
BlameAvoidance (presentational)	When Blame is avoided using spin, timing, excuses or distractions
BlameAvoidance (policy)	When officeholders or institutions avoid or limit blame by the content of what they do rather than reacting to policies after the fact. Policy selection is focused on limiting possibilities for blame rather than credit-claiming.

Category: Weaver

**Motivations:** This code describes instances in which motivations of decision-makers are apparent. The motivations are classified according to Weaver (1986) into credit-claiming, "good policy" and blame-avoidance.

Code	When to use
Motivations (credit-claiming)	When decision-makers act to claim credit
Motivations (goodpolicy)	When decision-makers act to produce good policy

Motivations (blame-avoidance)	When decision-makers act to avoid blame
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**BAStrategies:** Describes issues that can be assigned to one of the eight strategies of blame avoidance stipulated by Weaver (1986).

Code	When to use
BAStrategies (agenda)	When blame is limited or avoided by agenda limitation: preventing controversial choices from being considered
BAStrategies (redefine)	When blame is limited or avoided by redefining the issue: introducing new policy options
BAStrategies (money)	When blame is limited or avoided by throwing good money after bad: providing resources to prevent constituencies from suffering losses
BAStrategies (buck)	When blame is limited or avoided by passing the buck: deflecting blame by forcing others to make politically costly choices
BAStrategies (goat)	When blame is limited or avoided by finding a scapegoat: blaming others
BAStrategies (jump)	When blame is limited or avoided by jumping on the bandwagon: supporting politically popular alternatives
BAStrategies (circle)	When blame is limited or avoided by circling the wagon: diffusing blame by spreading it among as many policymakers as possible
BAStrategies (stopme)	When blame is limited or avoided by using "stop me before I kill again": preventing blame by keeping credit-claiming

	opportunities that conflict with policy preferences from being considered
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## Appendix 2: Articles

<b>Reference</b>	<b>Article</b>
FAZ, 30.04.2018	Mihm, A. (2018). Zündstoff Kohle. <i>Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung</i> .
FAZ, 30.05.2018	Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung. (2018). Ziemlich viel Kohle für die Kommission.
FAZ, 01.06.2018	Mihm, A. (2018). Stolperstart in den Kohleausstieg. <i>Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung</i> .
FAZ, 07.06.2018	Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung. (2018). Jetzt geht es den Kohlerevieren an den Kragen.
FAZ, 23.11.2018	Mihm, A. (2018). Das Bremsmanöver der Kanzlerin. <i>Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung</i> .
FAZ, 28.01.2019	Záboji, N. (2019). Teurer Kompromiss. <i>Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung</i> .
FAZ, 14.02.2019	Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung. (2019). In der Koalition Ärger über Ergebnisse der Kohlekommission.
FAZ, 05.04.2019	Kreuter-Kirchhof, C. (2019). Ein rechtlicher Rahmen für den Kohleausstieg. <i>Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung</i> .
FAZ, 10.04.2019	Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung. (2019). Mehr Aufschub im Kohleausstieg.
FAZ, 23.05.2019	Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung. (2019). 40 Milliarden Euro für den Kohleausstieg.
FAZ, 05.06.2019	Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung. (2019). Der Kohleausstieg könnte klimapolitisch wirkungslos sein.
FAZ, 24.06.2019	Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung. (2019). Streit um den Kohleausstieg bricht wieder auf.
FAZ, 23.08.2019	Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung. (2019). Der Kohleausstieg nimmt Gestalt an.
FAZ, 13.11.2019	Bünder, H. (2019). Der Weg zum Kohleausstieg. <i>Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung</i> .
FAZ, 22.11.2019	Záboji, N. (2019). Kohleausstieg ohne Klimaschutz?. <i>Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung</i> .
FAZ, 09.01.2020	Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung. (2020). Tempo für den Kohleausstieg.
FAZ, 12.01.2020	Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung. (2020). Kritik an Einigung über Kohleausstieg.
FAZ, 15.01.2020	Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung. (2020). Kohle-Aus vertieft Gräben zu Ostdeutschland.

- FAZ, 17.01.2020 Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung. (2020). Kritik an Einigung zu Kohleausstieg.
- FAZ, 31.01.2020 Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung. (2020). Nur Datteln 4 soll in Betrieb bleiben.
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- FAZ, 23.01.2020 Geinitz, C. (2020). Stromkunden zahlen für Kohle-Aus. *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*.
- FAZ, 30.01.2020 Geinitz, C. (2020). Kohle verschwindet - der Streit bleibt. *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*.
- FAZ, 08.02.2020 Burger, R. (2020). Der Kampf um Datteln 4. *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*.
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- SZ, 28.02.2020 Bauchmüller, M., & Müller, B. (2020). Es geht um viel. *Süddeutsche Zeitung*.