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Responsibility

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# Passing the Buck On the Acceptance of Responsibility

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## Abstract

In the Passing the Buck game, the  $n$  members of a group decide in a given order whether or not to incur costs so that they can fix a certain problem for the benefit of the group. Passing the Buck means that one relies on the service of a successor. The decision is influenced by social preferences and by strategic considerations. We derive three main conclusions from experiments with  $n=3$  and  $n=4$ . (i) The unique perfect Bayesian equilibrium of the Passing the Buck game with incomplete information about the preferences of other players generally fits the data, however with two interesting exceptions. (ii) Backward induction breaks down if it requires more than two steps, i.e., for the first player in the game with  $n=4$ . (iii) Making one of the members of the group an “expert” who alone is competent to fix the problem is connected with a change of social preferences.

## Keywords

Public Goods, Volunteer’s Dilemma, responsibility

## JEL codes

C73, D74, H42

## 1. Introduction

In a corner of the office which you share with several colleagues there is a small table with a coffee machine on it. When you approach it to get yourself a coffee you see that there is a mess. Coffee has been spilled and garbage is spread on the table. Will you clean the place up or will you “Pass the Buck” and hope for the service of one of the next users? Such small scale problems of postponing and leaving necessary cleaning/repair/re-equipment of commonly used property to others are abundant in everyday life. More severe are cases where people turn a blind eye to a helpless person, be it as car drivers on a lonely road or as pedestrians in a crowded city area. There are countless examples (reported in the press and in the internet) where it took a long time until a volunteer was ready to help. The classic example is the Samaritan (Luke 10: 30-35) who took care of a severely injured stranger after a priest and a Levite passed him without helping. We call this decision situation the *Passing the Buck*<sup>1</sup> (PB) game. On a large scale, PB games are played in the fields of debt policy or environmental policy. Every generation of people or politicians has to cope with a

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<sup>1</sup> The expression probably stems from poker where a marker indicated the person whose turn it was to deal. The player can refuse to deal and pass the buck.

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