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## **Safer to steal than score : press coverage of financial and sexual scandals, and electoral outcomes**

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SAFER TO STEAL THAN SCORE:  
PRESS COVERAGE OF FINANCIAL AND SEXUAL SCANDALS,  
AND ELECTORAL OUTCOMES

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

in

Theanship School of  
Mass Communication

by  
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## **ABSTRACT**

This dissertation examines communication processes surrounding political scandal. It demonstrates that scandal coverage is improperly calibrated to the severity of scandal accusations, with trivial but salacious sex scandals tending to receive inordinate amounts of press attention while deeper forms of financial corruption go unreported or underreported. Patterns of scandal coverage, in turn, result in real-world effects on public perceptions and electoral outcomes. Specifically, sex scandals generate such intense media scrutiny that accused officials often resign their offices rather than generate unwanted publicity. Financial scandals are often downplayed, resulting in little or no ramifications for the accused.

Recognizing basic differences in scandal typology is key to understanding press coverage and political ramifications of scandal. Previous efforts to explain and predict scandal coverage tend to take a “one size fits all” approach, assuming that different types of scandal create basically the same type of effects on public opinion and electoral outcomes. Rather than taking an “all scandals are created equal” approach, this study sheds new light on how different types of scandals – sexual and financial – are covered by the press, how voters react to news of these scandals, and how differential coverage decides electoral fortunes.

Chapter 1 outlines factors that influence press coverage of political scandals. A variety of economic and partisan incentives, and institutional journalistic routines are considered. Chapter 2 analyzes over five years of scandal news from the Pew News Coverage Index (NCI), showing differential patterns of coverage across a wide range of scandals. Chapter 3 uses a survey-based experiment to determine the influence of financial and sexual misconduct on judgments of accused officials. Using aggregated data collected on members of the U.S. House from 1996 to 2012, Chapter 4 explores how the interplay of press coverage and scandal type relate to electoral

outcomes. Chapter 5's conclusion suggests that patterns of scandal coverage actually make it electorally safer for public officials to be accused of bribery or extortion than cheating on a spouse. The findings present a challenge to journalistic accounts of official misconduct, suggesting the need for scandal reporting to actively address scope and severity.

## CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

### Rationale

Anthony Weiner was a rising star in the Democratic Party. Known for delivering fiery speeches on the floor of the U.S. House of Representatives, Weiner was considered a passionate legislator, well liked in his home district, and a shoe-in to be the next mayor of New York City (Barbaro, 2011). Weiner placed his political career in jeopardy, however, on May 27, 2011, when he used a public Twitter account to send sexually suggestive photos of himself to a 21-year-old college student living in Seattle, Washington. Partisan bloggers soon discovered the photos and began distributing information about Weiner's online indiscretions (Peters & Preston, 2011). The mainstream media picked up the story, describing in full the intimate details of Weiner's "sexting" antics— including explicit photos and messages Weiner sent to several women living in the United States. Press attention increased, becoming so intense that Democratic minority leader Nancy Pelosi called on Weiner to resign, which he did in a nationally televised press conference on June 16, 2011 (Hernandez, 2011). Anthony Weiner's Twitter escapades had resulted in electoral defeat, not to mention a sullied reputation that he could not escape from in subsequent elections (Durkin & Brown, 2013). Importantly, Weiner had been removed from office and stripped of his political power, not by his constituents, but by the influence of a national press determined to publicize the sordid details of his private life.

Cases like Anthony Weiner's make it clear that the press is willing to expend considerable effort reporting events that may reflect poorly on the moral character of government officials. Also clear is the real or perceived threat that scandal publicity poses to party image and policymaking activity, and to the leadership quality of individuals like Nancy Pelosi (Hernandez,

2011; see Marion, 2010). Even casual observation makes this much apparent. Yet cases like Weiner's raise important questions about the interplay of party action, press coverage and public response following scandal accusations. Some of these questions are straightforward and can be answered using empirical approaches. Other, normative questions delve deeper into political ethics, the roots of democracy, and the role of the press and citizenry in a free society. Guiding all of these questions, which are delineated in the subsequent sections of this chapter, is a single overarching query: Does the press take a socially responsible position in the treatment of official misconduct, providing more frequent coverage to more severe (i.e., financial) scandals?

The national news media has been charged with exercising too much power in the electoral process, leveraging undue influence over candidate nominations and elections (Patterson, 1994). Scholars and pundits have also alleged that the press does a lackluster business of informing the electorate (Patterson, 2013); that the press portrays national events through a distorted, partisan lens (Morris, 2005; Stroud, 2011); does not "adjudicate" factual disagreements, or tell audiences which political figures are telling the truth (Pingree, 2011); focuses too much on less informational "soft news" (Hamilton, 2004) and political strategy (Cappella & Jamieson, 1996; Fallows, 1997); and reports issues in an "episodic" rather than a "thematic" fashion, leading to superficial and fragmented accounts of national problems that make it difficult for officials to govern and citizens to act (Iyengar & Kinder, 2010). In short, the press has been accused of failing to channel political information to the public, the one group in a democracy that, theoretically, needs the information in order for democracy to function.

Citizens have noticed the shortcoming of the press. In poll after poll, the American public takes national news media to task for its increasing focus on infotainment and sensationalism and inability to provide a comprehensive picture of the day's political events (Patterson, 2013). It is

no wonder that public trust in the press bottomed out in 2012 (Gallup, 2012), or that the public's confidence in newsmen and television news has declined over the last two decades (see Figure 1). If the press remains focused on trivial celebrity gossip rather than substantive policy, crime waves instead of the causes of crime, and international athletes at the expense of international affairs, it risks alienating citizens who rely on it for crucial political information.

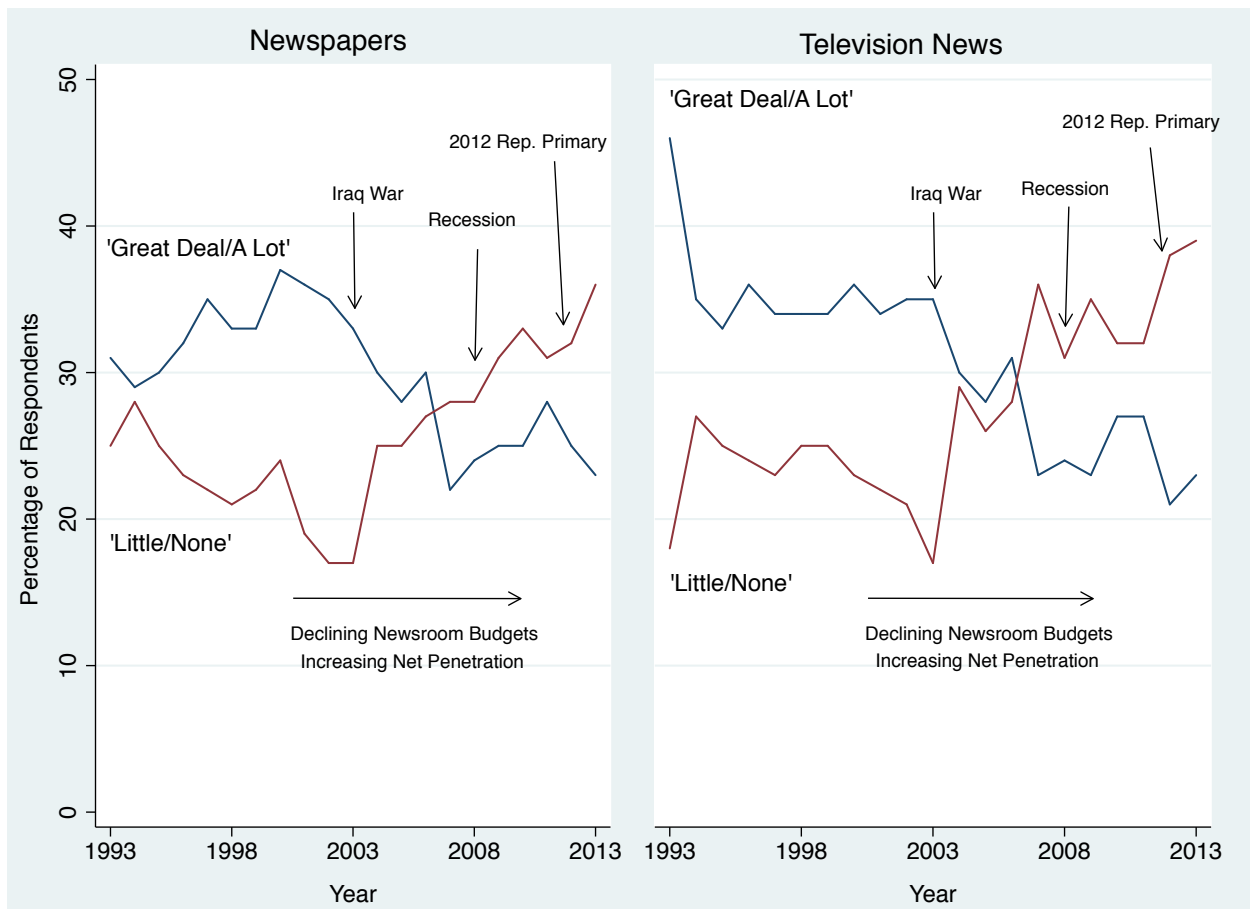


Figure 1.  
American Confidence in Newspapers and Television News, 1993 – 2013

Note: Nationally representative Gallup surveys asked American adults “how much confidence” they had in various institutions. The blue trend line represents the percentage of respondents who, when asked how much confidence they have in newspapers or TV news, said they have “A Great Deal” or “Quite a Lot.” The red trend line represents the percentage of respondents who, when asked how much confidence they have in newspapers or TV news, said they have “Very Little” or “None.” Events that may impact the public’s confidence in news are noted.

If the press also does an inadequate job of providing the public with information about government corruption and scandal, information that citizens need to make important electoral decisions, then it stands to reason that the press may hold undue influence over the process of removing dishonest or criminal persons from elected office. The question guiding this study is therefore broad but subtle, and significant. It asks about the ability of the press to address official misconduct by gauging accurately the scope and severity of allegations, about activities the press considers to be the private business of public officials, and about the power of reporting to sway public opinion and political support against an accused official. Understanding how the press reports scandal allegations is to understand both the political influence of the press and the power of elected officials and parties to mitigate damage, deflect blame, and restore reputation.

By pursuing this line of inquiry using a multimethod approach, this dissertation contributes to the literature by establishing that (1) the type of political scandal – sexual or financial in nature – influences how journalists and voters interpret the alleged misconduct, with journalists tending to focus on sexual misconduct and voters on financial misconduct, (2) even as voters care more about financial misconduct, economic incentives and institutional motives engender more press coverage of sex scandals relative to financial scandals, and (3) this pattern of coverage results in electoral losses, typically in the form of high rates of early resignations following accusations of sexual misconduct and firestorms of unwanted media attention.

### **Defining Scandal**

Political scandals can be defined as “actions or events involving certain kinds of transgressions which become known to others and are sufficiently serious to elicit a public response” (Thompson, 2000, p. 13, *italics original*). Scandals can occur in a variety of contexts involving a wide range of actors and differing degrees of complexity (Marion, 2010; Thompson,



2000). Rather than attempt to address every scandal type, and every potential context – a feat that may be impossible, given the potentially infinite number of factors unique to each scandal – this study focuses on two prevailing types of scandal scenarios: scandals involving officials accused of engaging in illegal or unethical financial conduct (“financial scandals”), and those involving officials accused of sexual impropriety (“sexual scandals” or “sex scandals”).

Financial and sex scandals both engender struggles over symbolic political power, in which the resources of reputation and trust are at stake. Both are considered “scandals” insofar as the “transgressions” “become known” to the public through news media. Financial scandals are distinctive, however, in that they “generally involve hidden linkages between economic and political power which are regarded as improper” (p. 121) whereas sex scandals represent “a transgression of prevailing norms or codes governing the conduct of sexual relations” (p. 120). While contextual aspects of financial and sex scandals may vary in terms of the actors involved, the culpability of the accused, the complexity of the events and so on, financial scandals can be conceptualized as independent from sex scandals, although certain cases may involve aspects of both types (e.g., paying a prostitute for services rendered using taxpayer dollars).

From normative democratic, ethical and legal perspectives, financial scandals also cause more damage than do sex scandals (Entman, 2012; Thompson, 2000). Theoretically, the public elects officials who will represent their economic interests, who will help them compete for a stake in state or federal resources, and who will conduct business in an ethical and legal manner. When financial scandals occur, for instance, when a politician uses taxpayer dollars to purchase personal items, they signify a severe breach of public trust. Financial scandals reflect negatively on the official’s honesty and fairness, as well as their ability to fulfill their democratic role as an elected official. Sex scandals, on the other hand, are often limited to private indiscretions that

have “little impact on society” (Entman, 2012, p. 13). Scandals of the sexual variety involve a breach of moral norms, but not democratic or (rarely) legal norms. Sex scandals may reflect negatively on an official’s character, including their honesty, but the misconduct involved is typically limited to the private judgments of the accused and do not, in and of themselves, constrain an official’s ability to fulfill their democratic role representing public interests.

There are, of course, cases that prove to be exceptions to the assumption that financial scandals are more damaging to democracy than are sex scandals. Improper sexual activity involving the misuse of public funds or property, or that involve illegal actions, may cross additional normative barriers. Officials that make promises to be “moral leaders” and later break those promises by engaging in a sexual misconduct may also commit violations of honesty and trust (Nelson, Dulio, & Medvic, 2002). Yet the vast majority of sex scandals do not involve violations of democratic or legal norms (Thompson, 2000). Instead, sex scandals involve a breach of society’s codes regulating the range of sexual activities that are considered proper or “right.” They are set in the personal sphere of the official, involve a small number of actors, and typically have little bearing on campaigning or policymaking. Why, then, does the press cover sex scandals? And why does the press seemingly cover sex scandals like Anthony Weiner’s with such zeal? Is the same intensity directed at financial scandals? Should it be? Assuming that financial scandals are more damaging, should the press give them relatively more attention?

### **Media Coverage of Political Scandals**

A free and responsible press is the lifeblood of democracy. The news provides the public with a window into the inner-workings of politics, delivering the information necessary for citizens to fulfill their roles as active and knowledgeable democratic participants. The press also acts as “Fourth Branch” of government and a “watchdog” on government activity, alerting

citizens to the possibility of corruption and scandal (Cook, 1996; 2005; Schudson, 1981; 2011). However, the press may not be “properly calibrated” to the severity of political scandal (Entman, 2012, p. 2), raising the possibility that relatively trivial but sensational ethical lapses like extramarital affairs become front page news, while serious but less sensational offenses like bribery or tax evasion go underreported. If institutional and economic concerns motivate frequent press coverage of salacious government affairs rather than normative concerns about the severity of the scandal (Hamilton, 2004; McManus, 1994; 1995), there is a risk that citizens will not have the information necessary to address severe government malfeasance at the ballot box.

Institutional, economic, partisan and individual-level journalistic concerns have the potential to propel relatively trivial personal matters like former Democratic Representative Anthony Weiner’s “sexting” scandal into the national spotlight for weeks, while isolated cases of financial wrongdoing may receive little press attention. Given the option, journalists may give easy-to-understand and dramatic sex scandal narratives “legs,” whereas the often-tedious and complex details of financial malfeasance do not receive prolonged attention. This dissertation demonstrates that the choices journalists make about how much attention financial and sex scandals receive affect how the public perceives scandal, and ultimately has legitimate electoral consequences for the representatives involved. Sex scandals like extramarital affairs, which may have a negligible impact on governing, receive more press attention than do financial scandals, and officials accused of a sex scandal often resign rather than face the media spotlight.

Political sex scandals should receive more coverage than financial scandals for a variety of reasons. First, the press is not obligated to consider normative arguments regarding the effects of different types of political scandal – financial or sexual in nature – on governing, public opinion, or democracy writ large. Media outlets cover issues that they believe will appeal to their

audiences and advertisers, which is increasingly soft news about government malfeasance (Hamilton, 2004; McManus, 1994; 1995; Patterson, 1994). The press does grant primary consideration to the severity of a scandal, or its normative implications. Even though sex scandals may be “personal indiscretions with little impact on society” (Entman, 2012, p. 13), the press nonetheless treats them as noteworthy events, as much or more so than financial scandals.

Sex scandals may also garner more coverage than financial scandals because they fit perfectly within the framework of institutional news norms and routines, as well as aspects of the contemporary media environment. While all types of political scandals may possess elements that appeal to a news organization’s audience- and profit-seeking motives, sex scandals contain particularly compelling, sensational elements that make them attractive to journalists and media organizations. Specifically, sex scandals almost always involve dramatic narratives, a common prerequisite for stories in modern journalism (Cook, 1996; 2005; Gans, 2004; Patterson, 1994). A sex scandal is essentially a dramatic and entertaining event that stirs up audience interest, eventually translating into increased revenues from advertisers who want to reach wider markets (McManus, 1994; 1995; Hamilton, 2004). Regardless of a sex scandal’s impact on public opinion of elected officials, or on the electoral fortunes of officials involved, the media focus on sex scandals for the human-interest factor. Financial scandals can certainly be dramatic and engender significant amounts of news coverage, but sex scandals are particularly exciting human dramas that illustrate the very ordinary flaws of extraordinary citizens (Dagnes, 2011).

Third, sex scandals are relatively easy for both the journalist and the audience to understand. Sex scandals typically involve only a few actors, and the natural human conflict at the heart of a sexual indiscretion such as an extramarital affair is easily conveyed by the journalist and easily interpreted by the audience. Financial scandals are relatively more complex

events, often requiring journalists and audiences to understand bureaucratic procedure to comprehend the magnitude of the transgression. The press should therefore tend to focus less on financial scandals, even though financial scandals may have more profound consequences for democratic and legislative processes than do sexual indiscretions (Thompson, 1995).

Finally, media have increasingly limited budgets to pursue original and investigative political reporting (Arnold, 2006; Patterson, 2013). With increasingly limited budgets come staff reductions and the need to cover political events that do not require extensive amounts of personnel or economic resources. Sex scandals typically meet these criteria. The average sex scandal does not require the same amount of resources to cover than does the average financial scandal. Whereas a financial scandal might involve multiple interviews and long-term investigation, information about a sexual scandal is typically given to a reporter by members of the rival party or stumbled upon by curious journalists (Entman, 2012; Marion, 2010). The personnel and resources that the press devotes to sex scandals is minimal compared to that required to investigate financial scandals. For these reasons, it is expected that media coverage of political sex scandals tends to be greater than media coverage of financial scandals. Formally,

**H1:** Sex scandals will receive more frequent media coverage than financial scandals.

For-profit media organizations have audience-motivated, economic incentives to cover sex scandals, no matter the severity or repercussions sex scandals have on public opinion, electoral outcomes, or the lawmaking process. Sex scandals appeal to the media's bottom line, which is establishing a sound financial footing (Hamilton, 2004; McManus, 1994; 1995), even though it plausible that financial scandals matter more for democracy.

**“Hard News” and “Soft News.”** Since the 1960s, the press has focused on selling news products using dramatic and sensational narratives (Gans, 2004; Patterson, 1994; Schudson,

2011). Indeed, news producers tend to conceptualize news narratives as dramas meant to entertain and captivate rather than information meant to enlighten (Epstein, 2000). In one famous memo, NBC Nightly News producer Reuven Frank explains the need for drama in news stories:

Every news story should, without any sacrifice of probity or responsibility display the attributes of fiction, of drama. It should have a structure and conflict, problem and denouement, rising action and falling action, a beginning, a middle, and an end. These are not only the essentials of drama; they are the essentials of narrative.

Frank quoted in Epstein (2000, p. 4-5)

Frank wrote his memo in the 1960s. In this sense, “soft news” that focuses on entertaining and dramatic narratives has been a staple of mainstream news production for over 50 years. News is a commodity that is bought and sold and entertaining narratives that contain elements of “fiction” and “drama” are needed for news products to compete in the marketplace.

Yet the demand for soft news content, and the market pressure for news organizations to produce this type of content have increased steadily since the 1960s (Patterson, 2013). With the advent of cable television and the Internet, audiences were offered more entertaining alternatives to the nightly news and the “hard” public affairs news typically found in major daily newspapers. Not only did cable TV and the Internet offer news consumers more entertaining and interactive news products, they offered audiences a vast array of “pure” entertainment options such as film, made-for-TV movies, music streaming, pornography, social networking and interpersonal applications, video games and so on (Fallows, 1997; McChesney, 2004; Patterson, 2013).

The mainstream press has responded to increasing numbers of entertainment options by trying to appeal to specific audiences with specific tastes. Major daily newspapers and the National Public Radio system now attempt to reach “hard news” audiences who want substantive public affairs information (Hamilton, 2004). Network news has responded by becoming even “softer.” Cable TV networks and online outlets tend to provide arguably the most sensational

programming. Given that the agendas and audiences of these media sectors have become fragmented, it is possible that major daily newspapers and radio news pay little attention to political sex scandals and focus more attention and resources on investigating deeper forms of financial corruption. In order to appeal to their own niche audience, network television, cable television, and online news outlets may spend more time discussing the latest salacious sex scandal than the comparatively dry details of the average financial scandal. Formally,

**H2A:** Media sectors that tend to focus on “hard news” – newspapers and radio – will cover financial scandals more frequently than sex scandals.

**H2B:** Media sectors that tend to focus on “soft news” – network TV, cable TV, and online news – will cover sex scandals more frequently than financial scandals.

If newspapers and radio programming tend to focus on delivering hard-hitting public affairs content on political corruption, television and online news outlets are just as attentive to the kind of soft news qualities that are inherent in political sex scandals.

It is possible, however, that specific news sources within each broad media sector – newspapers, radio, network TV, cable TV, online – cater to particular niche audience. While newspapers like The Wall Street Journal and radio shows like NPR’s Morning Edition and Talk of the Nation may spend significant airtime discussing financial corruption in Congress, other radio programs may give such scandals comparatively little attention. The agenda of these specific outlets may diverge greatly from other outlets within their sector. Similarly, issues that are discussed on The Today Show will not perfectly correspond with the mainstream news agenda because these shows cater to specific demographics, particularly younger female viewers (Hamilton, 2004). The same is true of programming on other early morning programs like CBS’s The Early Show and ABC’s Good Morning America. Online news outlets that must compete for audience attention among a multitude of alternative Internet sources must increasingly create soft

news content. News websites like The Huffington Post must, therefore, provide dramatic and attention-grabbing content that will appeal to younger demographics. Stories about political sex scandals fit this description. This study therefore posits competing expectations about particular “hard” and “soft” news outlets within each media sector. Formally, this study expects that:

**H3A:** “Hard news” sources The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, the PBS Newshour with Jim Lehrer, and NPR news programs Morning Edition and Talk of the Nation will more frequently cover official financial misconduct than sexual misconduct.

**H3B:** “Soft news” sources The Today Show, The Early Show, Good Morning America, and The Huffington Post will more frequently cover official sexual misconduct than financial misconduct.

While the agendas of these outlets may often overlap, each outlet will also be driven by specific, supply- and demand-side considerations that influence scandal coverage. Although the recession and the Internet have taken a toll on newsroom budgets in recent years, the extensive economic and personnel resources at the disposal of The New York Times and The Wall Street Journal may allow for more investigative reporting of complex and far-reaching political scandals involving money trails and financial deception. Likewise, PBS and NPR have extensive resources to investigate cases of financial wrongdoing in the political sphere. The same cannot be said of morning current events outlets Good Morning America or news sites like The Huffington Post that are expected to turn a profit by bringing in consistent ad revenues. On the demand-side, The Times and NPR’s audiences tend to be older and more politically informed viewers who want meaningful public affairs news, while outlets like The Early Show seek younger and less informed demographics who increasingly want sexiness over substance.

**Partisan Influences and Niche News.** Coverage of financial and sexual scandals may also be influenced by partisan treatment of scandal allegations. Recent changes in the media environment and in how audiences consume media may have broadly altered news agendas and



therefore audience perceptions of issue importance. One of the most conspicuous changes in the media environment is that news channels and audiences are increasingly divided along partisan lines (Stroud, 2008; 2010). This phenomenon has been deemed “partisan selective exposure” (Stroud, 2011) and refers to the tendency for partisans to select media content that is congruent with their political beliefs. Thus, to avoid news that may present contradictory views, Democrats now tend to self-select “liberal” media types like CNN whereas Republicans self-select “conservative” media types like Fox News Channel (Feldman, 2011; Stroud, 2011).

Experimental evidence provides considerable support for partisan selective exposure, finding that even non-political news stories are chosen based on the partisan slant of a news source (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009). Major network news on ABC CBS and NBC may still gear stories and advertising content toward ideologically moderate audiences, but with increasing competition between networks, cable news and talk radio target specific types of news viewers—i.e., political partisans. Cable channels and radio have thus created partisan “niche news” (Stroud, 2011) tailoring content to particular audience segments that enjoy consuming politically agreeable news while avoiding broadcasts that may challenge their views.

Since at least 2003, the news agendas of cable television outlets have become increasingly fragmented along partisan lines, providing biased patterns of coverage to political events that, in turn, have lasting effects on audience perceptions and attitudes (Morris, 2005; Stroud, 2011). Coverage of political scandal is not exempt from partisan biases (Entman, 2012; Puglisi & Snyder, 2011). Officials are often incentivized to make allegations about transgressions involving members of the opposition party in order to damage their reputation and delimit their political power (Schudson, 2004; Thompson, 2000). Political outlets that report through a partisan lens offer a ready platform for officials to make allegations about opposition

party members. As such, it is likely that liberal- or Democratic-leaning outlets (CNN) tend to provide more frequent coverage to Republican scandals, while Republican-leaning outlets (Fox News Channel) tend to provide more frequent coverage to Democratic scandals. Stated formally,

**H4A:** Republican-leaning cable television news outlets (Fox News Channel) will provide more frequent coverage of scandals that affect Democratic officials.

**H4B:** Democratic-leaning cable television news outlets (CNN) will provide more frequent coverage of scandals that affect Republican officials.

Partisan news outlets have their own news agendas that may indicate different patterns of covering scandal (Stroud, 2011). Partisan differences in scandal coverage may, in turn, have real world outcomes on audience perceptions. By downplaying likeminded partisan scandals, it is possible that partisan news audiences come to perceive their own party as scandal-free, while audiences view the opposition party as comprised only of crooks and sex fiends.

### **Individual Evaluations of Political Scandal**

If an official can “survive” scandal publicity long enough to run for reelection, how do voters judge the official’s transgressions? Does the public place more emphasis on punishing officials accused of committing financial misconduct than those accused of sexual misbehavior?

There is growing scholarly debate about the effect of different types of scandals on public opinion of elected officials (Doherty, Dowling, & Miller, 2011). On one hand, experimental research demonstrates that the public is not overly punitive toward officials accused of sexual transgressions such as extramarital affairs (Carlson, Ganiel, & Hyde, 2000; Funk, 1996; Sigal, Hsu, Foodim, Betman, 1988), especially if the official is otherwise effective at their job and the indiscretions do not invoke gender or racial stereotypes (Berinsky, Hutchings, Mendelberg, Shaker, & Valentino, 2011; Carolson et al, 2000). Survey research, on the other hand, demonstrates that financial and sex scandals produce equally negative public evaluations, or the

reverse relationship (Brown, 2006; Peters & Welch, 1980; Welch & Hibbing, 1997). While it is clear that all types of scandals can have deleterious effects on individual officials (Basinger, 2013; Dimock & Jacobson, 1995; Groseclose & Krehbiel, 1994; Jacobson & Dimock, 1994; Praino, Stockemer, & Moscardelli, 2013; Welch & Hibbing, 1997), parties (Maier, 2011), and institutions (Bowler & Karp, 2004), it remains uncertain whether voters punish officials accused of sexual dalliances more harshly than members accused of financial misconduct.

Theoretically, a “rational” public would be able to account for the relatively high amount of political and social damage that financial scandals create, punishing the accused severely. Since sex scandals typically occur within the private sphere and affect a handful of individuals, a rational public would likewise account for the minimal impact sex scandals have on an official’s ability to govern, or on society in general. Indeed, previous research shows that the American public tends to discount the private sexual dalliances of public officials, especially if the official is otherwise effective (Lawrence & Bennett, 2001; Sonner & Wilcox, 1999).

There are, however, a multitude of other individual-level factors that may also influence how voters evaluate officials accused of financial or sexual misconduct. First, the type of scandal should influence evaluations of the accused. Experimental research shows that the public tends to evaluate accusations of financial misconduct more harshly than “moral” or sexual violations (Doherty et al., 2011; Sigal et al., 1988). In this way, it could be said that the public is “rational,” possibly accounting for the magnitude of the scandal accusations when assessing the allegations. Similarly, this study predicts that financial scandals will garner more negative ratings. Formally,

**H5:** Individuals will evaluate officials accused of financial misconduct more negatively than officials accused of sexual misconduct.

The accused official’s party affiliation – Republican, Democrat, or some other party – combined with the voters’ affiliation or ideological leanings should also affect how the

transgression is judged. Humans are naturally predisposed to favor members of their group (Brewer, 1979; Huddy, 2013; Tajfel 1982), even when those members are accused of committing heinous actions (Morgan, Mullen, & Skitka, 2010). Likeminded partisans share a common identity that binds them to each other (Huddy, 2013), and encourages a defensive posture toward individuals who may threaten group norms. This is especially true among ideological conservatives, who prize loyalty to the group as a chief moral virtue (Graham, Haidt & Nosek, 2009; Haidt, 2012). It is likely that partisans, or liberal-conservative ideologues, consider the party identification of an official accused of scandal, with conservatives punishing Republican officials less severely than Democratic officials and liberals the opposite. Formally,

**H6A:** Conservatives will evaluate a Democratic official accused of a scandal more negatively than a Republican official accused of an identical scandal.

**H6B:** Liberals will evaluate a Republican official accused of a scandal more negatively than a Democratic official accused of an identical scandal.

All else being equal, conservatives and liberals should protect members of their affiliated groups, depositing highly negative evaluations on officials of the opposition party while deflecting blame from a member of their group. Moral values associated with liberal and conservative political ideology may also alter how voters evaluate accused officials. When voters read scandal news, certain keyword cues may prompt them to think about and evaluate the conduct in moral terms. When news audiences are exposed to a story about a wealthy congressman accused of cheating on his taxes, for instance, their Fairness / Cheating moral value may be primed, influencing how the individual evaluates the events, agents and actions described. When audiences are exposed to a story about sexual misconduct, their Sanctity / Degradation value may be activated, affecting evaluations of the sexual misconduct. Since liberals lean more heavily on Fairness / Cheating when making moral judgments, and since conservatives rely more

on Sanctity / Degradation, it is expected that conservatives will evaluate an official accused of a sex scandal more negatively than an official accused of financial misconduct, whereas liberals will deposit harsher punishments on officials accused of financial malfeasance. In other words, the five basic moral foundations to which all human beings adhere (Graham et al., 2009), and which are directly related to the ideological identities of political liberalism and conservatism (Haidt, 2012), may shape individual evaluations of accused officials. Formally,

**H7A:** Conservatives will evaluate an official accused of a sex scandal more negatively than will liberals.

**H7B:** Liberals will evaluate an official accused of a financial scandal more negatively than will conservatives.

Liberals and conservatives rely on different ideologically motivated values when making judgments. Conservatives care about fairness, but rely on that value less than liberals. Liberals typically ignore or downplay concerns about bodily or sexual sanctity or degradation. After accounting for the accused's political party affiliation (Republican or Democrat), an interaction between scandal type and participant ideology is expected to influence evaluations.

Finally, there is an expectation of an interaction between scandal type and a citizen's level of political knowledge. Political knowledge has been linked to articulating more consistent and nuanced policy opinions (Sturgis & Smith, 2010), increased tolerance for minority political groups (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996), and being able to assign blame for bad policy to the responsible officials (Gomez & Wilson, 2001). Individuals with high levels of political knowledge may be able to comprehend the magnitude of a complex financial scheme and punish officials accused of scandal more harshly than individual who score low in political knowledge. Conversely, sex scandals are relatively easy-to-follow human dramas, making them comprehensible to individuals at all levels of knowledge. There is an interactive expectation,

then, between political knowledge and scandal type, such that political sophisticates exact harsher punishments on officials accused of financial misbehavior and individuals with low levels of political knowledge provide negative evaluations of those accused of sexual misconduct,

**H8A:** Individuals with high levels of political knowledge will evaluate officials accused of financial scandals more negatively than will individuals who possess low levels of political knowledge; the reverse will be true of sex scandals.

A competing expectation assumes that the magnitude of the consequences associated with financial scandals is understandable at every level of political knowledge. However, knowledge may bias processing of scandal information, such that the more knowledgeable the citizen is, the more harshly they evaluate officials accused of trivial sexual misconduct. This hypothesis is based on the logic that more sophisticated citizens are also more politically engaged and receptive to political gamesmanship inherent in news messages. For instance, Chong and Druckman (2007a; 2007b; see also Druckman, Peterson, & Slothuus, 2013) find evidence that knowledgeable individuals are more susceptible to partisan framing and cues in news messages. This suggests that while high levels of political knowledge may have a number of desirable byproducts, such as increased tolerance for minority groups in society (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996), high levels of knowledge may also bias individuals to think about the game of politics rather than the substance. In a scandal scenario, we would thus expect,

**H8B:** Individuals with high levels of political knowledge will evaluate officials accused of sexual scandals more negatively than will individuals who possess low levels of political knowledge; the reverse will be true of financial scandals.

The world of politics attracts individuals of all stripes, of all creeds and levels of sophistication. It is clear that individuals who are knowledgeable about politics are better able to understand the implications of national events and the inner workings of government, are better able to recognize the scope of their duties as democratic citizens, and are more sophisticated in

assigning policy credit (and blame) where it is due. Based on this logic, we might expect that knowledgeable citizens punish officials accused of financial scandals more harshly than officials accused of relatively sexual misbehavior. Yet having a vast store of political knowledge is not without its drawbacks. Knowledgeable individuals are more susceptible to biased processing of partisan messages. In a scandal scenario, knowledgeable individuals may therefore exact harsher punishments on relatively trivial sex scandals than will their low-knowledge counterparts.

### **Political Scandals and Electoral Survivability**

Given the idea that news media pay differing amounts of attention to financial and sexual scandals, how do patterns of press coverage influence electoral outcomes? Several empirical studies have examined factors that affect a political official's electoral "survivability" after scandal accusations are made, focusing on the impact of press coverage. For example, Herrick (2000) found that the frequency of Washington Post stories mentioning a U.S. House scandal related negatively to House member being reelected. The more frequently a scandal was mentioned, the higher the probability of a House member's electoral defeat. Shea (1999) found that the frequency of local news stories about a scandal adversely impacted a congressman's electoral survivability. Since the public relies on the media to tell them "what to think about" (Cohen, 1963; McCombs, 2004; McCombs & Shaw, 1972), increased scandal coverage should have deleterious effects on a political official's post-scandal electoral fortunes, assuming that all scandal coverage acts as negative publicity for the member accused. Formally,

**H9A:** Frequency of scandal coverage will relate positively to losing reelection.

**H9B:** Frequency of scandal coverage will relate positively to resigning office.

It is also plausible that the type of scandal, financial or sexual in nature, interacts with press coverage. Sexual scandals like that of former Representative Anthony Weiner engender

intense media scrutiny. In the case of Weiner, House minority leader Nancy Pelosi called on the disgraced congressman to resign (Hernandez, 2011). Similar evidence suggests party leadership asked former representatives Mark Foley (Halloran, 2011), Gary Condit (Standora, 2001), and Eric Massa (Benjamin & McAuliff, 2010) to resign in the wake of a sex scandal. In each case, the ensuing media firestorm resulted in party leadership calling on the representative to resign or retire from office, which they inevitably did rather than distract from their party's agenda.

Since for-profit media norms and routines presumably oblige the press to pay more attention to sexual scandals than to financial scandals, there is an expectation that sex scandals will also result in higher resignation rates than will financial scandals. Sex scandals may receive such intense press coverage that accused members often have to step aside rather than distract from their party's policymaking and governing agendas. An interactive relationship between scandal type and frequency of press coverage is thus predicted. Specifically,

**H10:** The effect of press coverage on resignations from office will be greater for officials accused of sexual misconduct than for officials accused of financial misconduct.

Importantly, high rates of electoral defeat stemming from a sex scandal are not hypothesized to emerge from a voting bloc that makes a post-scandal election a referendum on an official's sexual affairs. Accusations of sex scandal should result in higher rates of resignation because members face intense media scrutiny, and are subsequently pressured by party leadership to resign. The press and party leadership, not voters, decide the fortunes of an official accused of sexual misconduct, whereas financial misconduct is usually decided at the ballot box.

### **Summary**

The press controls the "pictures in our heads" (Lippmann, 1997). Issues that are covered frequently in the media become the issues we think about (Cohen, 1963), through the press-to-public transfer of issue importance (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; McCombs, 2004). In this sense,



the press can wield tremendous power over the symbolic political resources of reputation and trust. The press can improve or damage an official's image, with scandal publicity often threatening to limit the accused's political capital (Marion, 2010; Schudson, 2004; Thompson, 2000), and degrade the image and policymaking capability of the associated party.

In a democracy, the press also functions as an intermediary political institution, a "Fourth Branch" of government that scrutinizes government activity, including government corruption and scandal (Cook, 1998; 2005; Schudson, 1981; 2011). The press plays a vital role in communicating information about government malfeasance to the public, so that voters have the necessary evidence to forgive and reelect or "vote the bastards out" during the next season. If the press is not "properly calibrated" (Entman, 2012) to the severity of political scandal, however, the result may be an overemphasis on trivial but entertaining sex scandals rather than grave abuses of power for personal financial advancement. Extramarital sexual dalliances like that of Anthony Weiner's online escapades may dominate the news agenda, while theft, bribery and extortion garner relatively less press attention. In essence, this chapter suggests that patterns of news coverage may make it "safer" for a politician to steal from his own constituents than to "score" sexual favors. The former type of misconduct garners relatively less attention from the national media compared to sexual misconduct that titillates and amuses (Schudson, 2004).

Chapter 2 analyzes over five years of scandal news coded by Pew Research and made available through the News Coverage Index (NCI) database. This chapter investigates the possibility that media give more coverage to sex scandals relative to financial scandals. Scandals involving congressional officials in the Legislative branch are considered. Partisan biases in reporting among cable television news network (CNN and Fox News Channel) are also considered as a factor that may influence variation in frequency of scandal coverage.

In Chapter 3, a survey-based experiment examines individual-level factors that shape evaluations of officials accused of engaging in financial or sexual scandals. Using a 2 (Republican / Democratic) X 2 (financial / sex scandal) experimental design, this chapter isolates the individual impact of party affiliation and scandal type on evaluations of the accused. Additionally, this chapter considers the effects of participant ideology and knowledge on judgments. Since humans tend to favor members of their social group, it is hypothesized that conservatives will tend to give more negative evaluations of Democrats accused of a scandal.

Chapter 4 provides an additional test of differences in financial and sex scandal coverage over a longer period of time. This chapter uses data aggregated on members of the U.S. House of Representatives from 1996 to 2012, analyzing the effect of media scrutiny on electoral outcomes. The interactive influence of media attention and scandal type – financial or sexual – on the probability the representative resigns, loses reelection or wins reelection is assessed.

This study concludes by summarizing results in Chapter 5. Here, the study provides theoretical implications for citizens and political parties, and practical recommendations for news media organizations and journalists. Democracy depends on a press that's "properly calibrated" to government malfeasance in order to survive. The sexual transgressions of our officials may be overlooked as long as they are still able to perform their jobs as elected representatives. And while it may be true that "the press is in the news business, not the business of politics" (Patterson, 1994, p. 36), the press' adopted role as government watchdog suggests that journalists should take an active role in accounting for the severity of scandal claims before reporting. The press has incentives to ignore or downplay partisan claims about sex scandals like extramarital affairs, especially if such scandals do not violate the law or involve abuses of power.

## **CHAPTER 2. PRESS COVERAGE**

### **Introduction**

Every word of news, whether written or spoken, is shaped by a multitude of political, economic and institutional forces. Although political biases can certainly color press accounts of scandal (Pugilisi & Snyder, 2011), scandal news is not simply result of partisan chicanery.

The news is also a “product” or “commodity” that audiences purchase (Hamilton, 2004; McManus, 1994; 1995). News topics that audiences find desirable are generally topics that news producers find desirable; journalists and editors understandably want to retain and grow their audience base. It is no wonder then, that the press to a certain extent allows audience demand to influence its coverage. Since the press is a business, it has incentive to give audiences interesting and colorful content in order to attract even larger audiences. Expanding audiences, younger audiences in particular, increase sales of news products such as newspaper or online news subscriptions, simultaneously increasing the likelihood that advertisers will buy column inches or broadcast time that reaches very large, very desirable consumer demographics (Hamilton, 2004).

Since news is intended to be pleasurable to watch or read, it often focuses on entertainment or “soft news” involving political gamesmanship (Cappella & Jamieson, 1996; Fallows, 1997) and titillating scandals (Schudson, 2004), just as much or more so than hard-hitting public affairs (McManus, 1994; 1995). The press is, at least in part, a commercial entity that lives and dies by the audience’s hand. For it to be an organ of democracy, providing crucial political information to citizens, it needs first to survive economically. If it comes down to an editorial choice between reporting salacious news about a politician’s sex life or relatively bland information about financial malfeasance, journalists are incentivized to err on the side of

entertaining their audience rather than putting them to sleep. Sex scandals typically involve entertaining, provocative narratives, whereas the dry facts of financial scandals are often dull.

Moreover, the kind of “human drama” commonly involved in a political sex scandal is easy for both journalists and audiences to understand. Everyone who was alive at the time still remembers to whom “Monica” and to what the “blue dress” refers. These terms entered public discourse by way of a highly publicized affair between former Democratic President Bill Clinton and intern Monica Lewinsky, an affair that drew around-the-clock media attention for the better part of 1998. This real-life political drama was a compelling story about a man who lived the American Dream, rising up from his humble beginnings in rural Arkansas to become the leader of the free world, only to have a successful career torn asunder by accusations of impropriety. Audiences may have puzzled over the political risk involved in the affair, yet Clinton’s public approval ratings remained strong after the scandal was revealed (Zaller, 1998), suggesting that audiences could understand and were willing to forgive Clinton’s very basic human failing as well as his desire to keep his sexual affairs private. The Lewinsky scandal was easy for audiences to grasp because it involved only a handful of actors – Clinton, his wife, and Lewinsky – and described an interpersonal relationship as old as human sexuality itself.

Contrast coverage of sex scandals like Clinton’s with financial corruption. Does the average citizen – or journalist, for that matter – comprehend the financial transactions that occurred between former lobbyist Jack Abramoff, former Republican Representative John Doolittle and other relevant members of Congress? Even though the Abramoff scandal first made national media attention seven years after the Lewinsky affair, in 2005, it is likely that those alive at the time remember relatively fewer details about that scandal than the Lewinsky affair. Why? Its details of conspiracy and financial fraud may simply be too complex compared to the

Lewinsky scandal, in which two words, “blue dress,” can summarize the thrust of the event.

Sexual scandals are easy for journalists and audiences to understand, and should therefore garner more coverage than scandal involving the complexities of campaign finance or the tax code.

Routine, institutional factors also influence the daily headlines and the amount of coverage a particular event, such as a political scandal, receives. First, it is widely understood that official sources drive press coverage. News media producers, including journalists and editors, have working relationships with political officials, exchanging the opportunity for publicity for the opportunity to get the inside scoop on the latest political dealings (Cook, 1996; 2005). In this way, the news media is a kind of “Fourth Branch” of American government, acting as an intermediary institution between the other branches. Political information about all three branches – Executive, Legislative and Judicial – flow through the press, between branches, and to the public. The flow of information involves the regular practice of journalists relying on political officials for their political content. Political scandals, in this way, are often dependent on statements by both likeminded officials and members of the opposition party. Indeed, as Enmtan (2012) suggests, opposition party officials often keep scandals alive, making additional allegations and revelations that keeps the press interested in pursuing misconduct.

Since news media producers rely on official statements for news content, this also implies that any scandal involving a high-ranking official who has a pre-established working relationship with journalists – especially the President of the United States and officials from the Executive Branch – may receive relatively more coverage than scandals involving U.S. state officials who may not have regular access to national media. The president commands national media attention. As such, there is an expectation that any scandal affecting the Executive branch should garner more coverage than scandals involving, for instance, state governors. Journalists also have

working relationships with members of Congress, especially high-ranking party leaders.

Therefore, news media should give more attention to scandals involving members of Congress than to scandals involving state officials. All news media relies on official statements, such as press releases, to motivate political coverage. This routine also pertains to scandal coverage.

Journalistic reliance on official sources should also decrease scandal coverage in cases of speedy resignations from office, i.e., resignations that occur within two weeks of the initial revelations. One purpose of making an official statement about a scandal is to generate news coverage that will damage the symbolic power of the opposition party, including its members' reputation and trust (Entman, 2012; Thompson, 2000). When the accused official(s) resign their political positions quickly, they remove all vestiges of substantive or symbolic power.

Consequently, scandal coverage should die down. The news is constrained, in part, by official sources. And when an accused official resigns from office, the original purpose of releasing information about a scandal – to damage the official – is removed from the equation.

Finally, institutional factors associated with the medium through which news is disseminated also shape press coverage. The “slow” and “logical” medium of printed newspapers and its limited daily “newshole” forces editors to eliminate pure entertainment content to make room for more hard-hitting public affairs news (Hamilton, 2004). Meanwhile, the 24/7 nature of cable and radio news, and the potentially infinite newshole of online news channels allow for more coverage of entertainment-driven politics. The nature of the medium, in the case of cable, radio and online news, suggests an opportunity to provide additional coverage of entertaining politics, specifically, scandal. Compared to print newspapers, cable television, radio and online news outlets should give more attention to any type of political scandal.

There is also the consideration of press agenda “congestion” (Boydston, 2013; Nyhan, 2014). At a given moment, the press has a range of official political news it can choose to publicize. When congress is in session, for instance, the number of official political statements increases. During the summer, when congress is adjourned and the president is vacationing, there is little noteworthy political activity unless a national emergency sparks urgent coverage. Weekends and holidays are also periods of decreased political activity, as are particular days of the week (e.g., Fridays) when relatively less official business transpires. For these reasons, there are fairly predictable daily, weekly, monthly and seasonal shocks to the media agenda. One week the national news agenda may be to “congested” to discuss what amount to an official’s trivial sexual liaisons. During an uneventful summer, a relatively trivial sex scandal may be blown up into Watergate proportions. For these reasons, it is also expected that day in which a scandal first gains national attention should alter how the intensity of press response.

## **Method**

### **Data**

To assess differences in press coverage of financial and sexual scandals, this study combined publicly available news coverage data from the Pew Research Center’s News Coverage Index (NCI) with aggregated data on each scandal mentioned in the NCI. The NCI is an ongoing content analysis of news coverage that started Jan. 1, 2007 and was available through May 31, 2012. Pew’s unit of analysis was the news story. Fourteen trained Pew coders coded news stories, with a calculated percent agreement of 100% for story date, 96% for source, and 87% agreement for “big story” topic. While a simple percent agreement reliability statistic does not take into account random coder agreement (Riffe, Lacy, & Fico, 2005), the percentages for

the primary variables were high enough, and the conceptualization of variables (e.g., story date) were reasonably clear enough that little random error in story codes should theoretically exist.

Pew administrators selected news stories for coding using a multistage purposive sampling method. According to Pew, this method was employed “because of differences in measuring systems across media” (Pew, 2012). Random sampling from a diverse array of media content would not account for the number of news outlets in a given sector (e.g., cable TV news), the amount of news programming in each outlet, or audience reach. It would also fail to account for medium-specific variation in story length; for instance, word counts in a print article or a cable news transcript. Thus, all NCI data are selected and weighted to account for variation in formats, and potential audience reach across mediums (Pew, 2012).

This study used an inductive method to identify and select scandal cases from the Pew NCI. For scandal cases to be included in this analysis, each scandal event had to meet several criteria. First, the scandal had to be available in the Pew data, meaning that it had to have occurred between January 1, 2007 and May 31, 2012. Scandals occurring before 2007 or after May 2012 were not included in the analysis. Second, scandal coverage had to affect a prominent political figure, including a member of, or someone directly linked to members of the Executive, Legislative or Judicial branches, or a state governor. While covered heavily, “celebrity scandals” or controversies such as the Jerry Sandusky Penn State child sex abuse case were not included in the analysis since these cases did not directly relate to politics. Finally, the scandal had to refer to a financial or sexual transgression. Scandals that referred to a breach of sexual mores, such as the disclosure that former New York Governor Eliot Spitzer hired prostitutes were considered “sex scandals.” Events that described immoral or illegal financial conduct, such as former Louisiana Representative William Jefferson’s bribery case, were considered examples of “financial



scandals.” Using this method, the analysis discovered (n = 27) scandal scenarios with (n = 4,157) related stories in the Pew NCI. Appendix A shows a full list of scandals included in the analysis.

**Measures. Control Variables.** Several dummy variables were included in the analysis, to account for aspects of the scandal scenarios, including the behavior of the accused, as well as the political and media contexts. First, a dummy variable was created assessing whether the official(s) accused resigned within two weeks of the scandal revelations. Approximately 18.52% of scandals in the analysis involved officials who resigned within two weeks of receiving national attention. It is notable that all of these resignations were sex scandals involving a member of Congress (e.g., former Democratic Representative Eric Massa). A continuous control variable called duration assessed the number of years the scandal appeared in Pew NCI coverage (M = 1.11, SD = 0.22, range = 0 to 4). The majority of scandal events (37.04%) lasted less than one year. A dummy variable called Republican was used to assess whether scandal stories affected mainly Democratic (59.26%) or Republican officials (40.74%). Another dummy control variable assessed whether the scandal involved a misdemeanor or felony criminal offense (22.22% involved a criminal offense). A dummy variable was also used to control for whether the accused official conducted proactive publicity in defense of their conduct (3.70%). Only in the case of Rod Blagojevich’s bribery scandal did officials engage in proactive defense of their conduct. This meant that officials sought media publicity in order to defend their actions.

**Independent Variable.** The primary independent variable was the type of political referred to, financial (40.74%) or sexual (59.26%). This variable was labeled financial scandal in subsequent modeling procedures, with financial scandals coded high and sex scandals coded low. Scandals were considered primarily “financial” in nature if they involved unethical activities surrounding public monies or the use of power to obtain or transfer personal monies, and “sexual”

if they referred to any kind of socially deviant sexual conduct. For example, the “D.C. madam” scandal involved congressmen hiring prostitutes, presumably with sexual intent in mind.

**Dependent Variable.** A count of scandal news stories was the primary outcome variable. This variable measured the raw frequency of news stories in the Pew NCI pertaining to financial (M = 189.64, SD = 369.78) and sexual scandals (M = 129.44, SD = 138.69). This variable was heavily skewed ( $X^2 = 32.34$ ,  $p < .001$ ), suggesting the need for non-linear modeling techniques.

**Procedure.** The first goal of the analysis was to determine whether cases of financial or sexual misconduct receive differential press coverage, controlling for variables that may influence the relationship between scandal type and press attention. Due to the dependent variable being comprised of count data and being positively skewed, the appropriate statistical modeling procedure was a Poisson regression (Long & Freese, 2006). This procedure assumes that the dependent variable cannot take on negative or non-integer values. Data are assumed to be raw counts of a particular phenomenon, in this case, counts of news stories. All negative binomial coefficients are interpreted as the effect of a one-unit change in the predictor variable resulting in a B unit change in the difference in the logs of the expected counts of the dependent variable, holding all other variables in the model constant (Long & Freese, 2006).

Additionally, it should be noted that standard errors were clustered by the year the scandal appeared in the Pew NCI, to eliminate any temporal effects on the dependent story count variable. The primary concern here was to eliminate any changes in the media or political environments that could have occurred between the years 2007 to 2012, including increasing cable TV news and Internet penetration among the American population, the decline of newsroom budgets especially among “hard news” sources such as print newspapers, the rise of tablet computers as a news delivery mechanism, and changes in party leadership among the

branches of federal government (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008; Boydston, 2013; Hamilton, 2004; Patterson, 2013). Any of these changes may influence relationships analyzed in the model, and thus, clustering standard errors by year the scandal began was a necessary precaution.

A second, exploratory analysis examined how different media sectors and outlets covered scandals at the story level ( $n = 4,157$ ). This analysis used only Pew NCI data and raw counts of scandals stories as the dependent variable. Media sector – newspapers, radio, network TV, cable TV, and online news outlets – and outlet (e.g., Fox News Channel, CNN) were used as the independent variables. Here the goal was to determine simple differences in scandal coverage by sector and outlet, determining whether media sector and partisan bias drove patterns of overall coverage. Since news tends to follow seasonal patterns, with the news agenda “congested” during some periods and not others, this analysis assessed scandal coverage by year.

## **Results**

**Effect of Scandal Type.** This chapter hypothesized that qualitative differences among political scandals would affect media coverage. Specifically, it was predicted that sexual scandals would garner more media attention than financial scandals (H1). The Poisson regression model shown in Table 1 provides evidence in support of H1. The results shown in Table 1 suggest that sexual scandals garnered more coverage than did financial scandals ( $b = -1.06$ ,  $SE = 0.31$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Indeed, the rate of story counts decreases by 85.81 going from the average sex scandal to the average financial scandal, with all other variables in the model held constant.

A number of other control variables were strong predictors of scandal news coverage. Official resignations within two weeks of scandal revelations related to fewer stories being published about a scandal ( $b = -2.05$ ,  $SE = 0.52$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Scandals reflecting on members of the Judicial Branch also generated less coverage than gubernatorial scandals in the excluded baseline

category ( $b = -1.86$ ,  $SE = 0.28$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Scandals generated more news coverage the more years they were covered ( $b = -1.86$ ,  $SE = 0.28$ ,  $p < .001$ ), if they involved a criminal misdemeanor or felony charge ( $b = 0.53$ ,  $SE = 0.21$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and if the accused official actively sought scandal publicity ( $b = 1.75$ ,  $SE = 0.44$ ,  $p < .001$ ), as was the case with former Illinois Governor Rod Blagojevich, who conducted an aggressive PR campaign to address claims of bribery.

Table 1.  
Poisson Regression Predicting Frequency of Scandal News Stories

	<b>b</b> (SE)	<b>z</b>	<b>95% CI</b>		<b>p</b>	<b>Min--&gt;Max</b>
			<b>Lower</b>	<b>Upper</b>		
Financial Scandal	-1.05 (0.38)	-2.75	-1.81	-0.30	0.01	-85.81
Resign in < Two Weeks	-1.81 (0.53)	-3.44	-2.84	-0.78	0.00	-110.02
Duration	0.27 (0.11)	2.43	0.05	0.50	0.02	78.35
Republican	-0.20 (0.40)	-0.51	-0.98	0.57	0.61	-22.68
Criminal	0.58 (0.25)	2.32	0.09	1.06	0.02	52.70
Proactive Publicity	1.70 (0.38)	4.42	0.94	2.45	0.00	382.65
Constant	4.85 (0.34)	14.32	4.18	5.51	0.00	---
N				27		
PRE				75.90%		

Note: Standard errors are clustered by the year the scandal first made national media attention to mitigate extraneous temporal effects. The model's proportional reduction in error (PRE) of 75.90% suggests that the model explained a considerable amount of variation in the outcome variable, above and beyond a model without independent variables entered. A two-tailed t-test also showed a significant effect of the scandal type variable and stories with scandal mentions. \*\*\* $p < .001$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \* $p < .05$ , † $p < .10$

**Coverage by Media Sector.** H2A and H2B predicted that newspapers and radio would pay more attention to financial scandals (H2A), whereas online news, network television news, and cable television news would pay more attention to sex scandal (H2B).

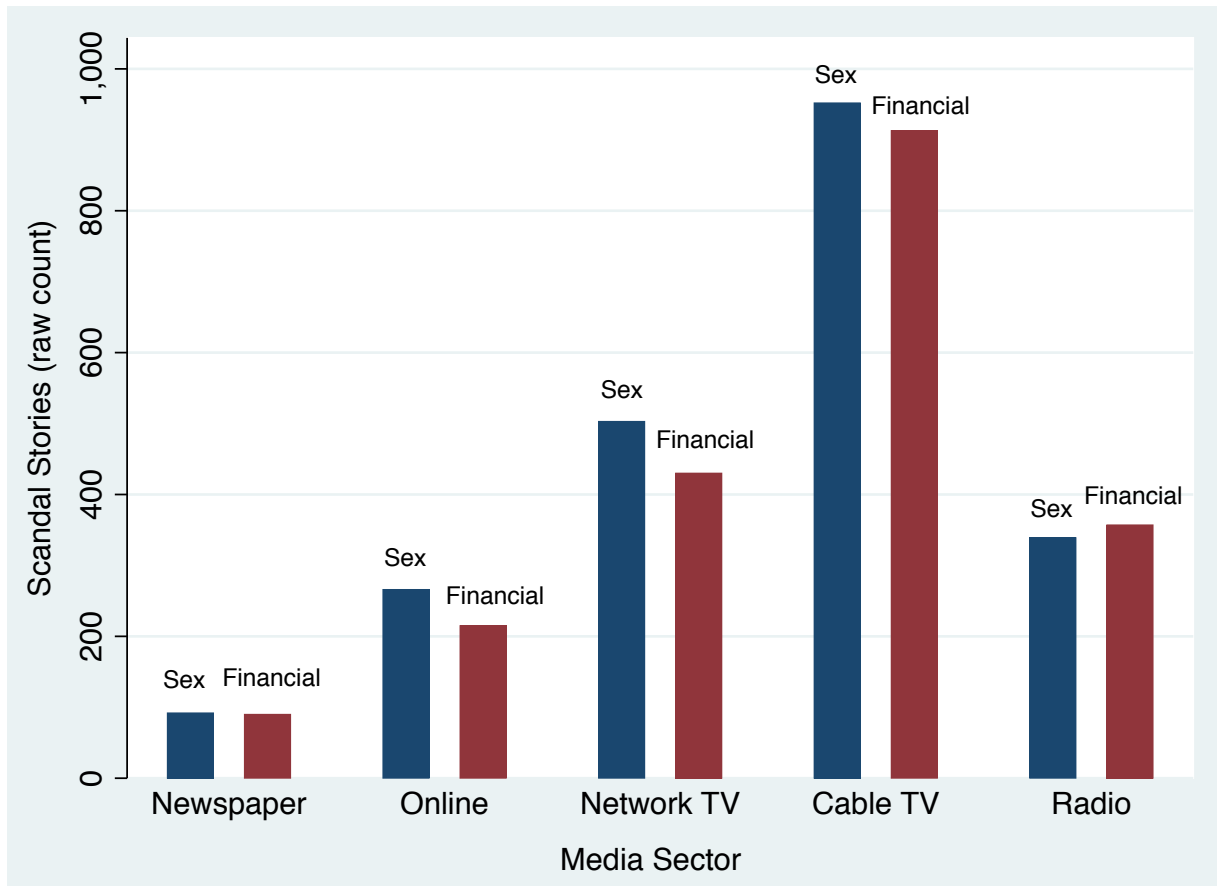


Figure 2.  
Frequency of Financial and Sexual Scandal Stories by Media Sector

Note: Frequencies derived from Pew News Coverage Index (NCI), covering 27 cases of political scandal and 4,157 stories from Jan. 1 2007 to May 31 2012. A similar figure using proportions of stories produced a highly similar pattern of results.

There is partial evidence to support each hypothesis. Figure 2 shows raw frequencies of sexual and financial scandal coverage across five media sectors. A series of one-tailed t-tests were used to determine differences in the proportion of coverage a medium (e.g., cable TV) gives to a particular type of scandal. A one-tailed t-test revealed that radio news outlets did

provide more attention to financial political scandals than sex scandals  $t(4,155) = -1.77, p < .05$ .

Counter to the prediction, there was no difference in how newspapers covered financial and sexual scandals ( $p = 0.37$ ). H2A is partially supported.

The result also show that online news  $t(4,155) = 1.66, p < .05$  and network television outlets  $t(4,155) = 1.49, p < .10$  provided more frequent coverage of sex scandals than financial scandals. Counter to the prediction, there was no significant difference in how cable television news covered financial and sexual scandals ( $p = 0.80$ ). H2B receives partial support.

**Coverage by Media Sources.** Financial scandals should receive more frequent coverage from sources that specialize in disseminating financial information and substantive public affairs news (H3A). Sources like The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, the PBS Newshour with Jim Lehrer, and National Public Radio news programs like Morning Edition should pay more attention to official financial misconduct than sex scandals. These outlets tend to cater to older, high-income audiences that seek “hard news” about elections, public policy, and foreign affairs (Hamilton, 2004). Moreover, the ample newsroom budgets of the Times and Journal may provide enhanced opportunity to do original investigative reporting into the complex, bureaucratic world of official financial misconduct. PBS and NPR, being non-profit media organizations, should not have a profit-seeking motive to frequently report about salacious sexual misbehavior. As predicted, hard news sources like NPR’s Morning Edition and Talk of the Nation provide more coverage to financial scandals than sex scandals (see Figure 3).

A series of one-tailed t-tests comparing the proportion of financial and sexual scandal stories each source provided demonstrates a prevailing focus on financial scandals among “hard news” outlets. The PBS Newshour with Jim Lehrer  $t(4,155) = -3.71, p < .001$  and NPR’s Morning Edition and Talk of the Nation  $t(4,155) = -3.46, p < .001$  both provided more coverage of financial

scandals than sex scandals, supporting **H3A**. Counter to the hypothesis, one-tailed t-tests revealed that The New York Times ( $p = 0.55$ ) and The Wall Street Journal ( $p = 0.32$ ) provided roughly equal amounts of coverage to financial and sex scandals. One potential explanation for these divergent findings is that the lack of a profit motive allows NPR and PBS to focus on “boring” and detailed cases of financial misconduct, while The Times and The Journal’s profit-seeking structure still motivates coverage to appeal to consumer demand for sensational stories.

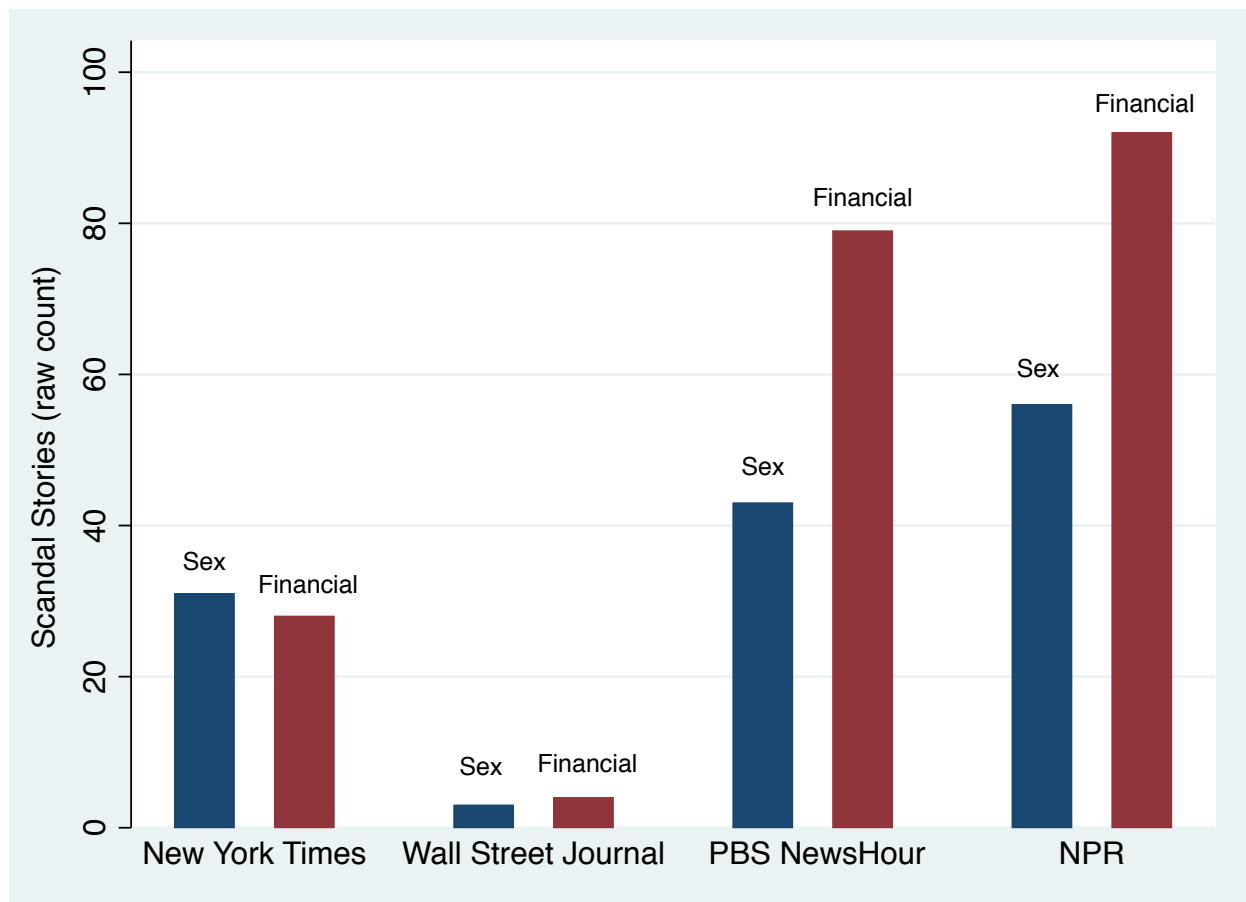


Figure 3.  
Frequency of Financial and Sexual Scandal Stories by “Hard News” Source

Note: Frequencies derived from Pew News Coverage Index (NCI), covering 27 cases of political scandal and 4,157 stories from Jan. 1 2007 to May 31 2012.

If “hard news” sources like The Wall Street Journal give roughly equal attention to sexual and financial misconduct, how do purely “soft news” sources such as NBC’s The Today Show handle scandal coverage? It was predicted that sex scandals should be particularly appealing fodder for “soft news” sources like NBC’s The Today Show, CBS’s The Early Show, ABC’s Good Morning America, and The Huffington Post news website (H3B).

Sources like The Today Show have substantial news holes that they must fill with original and entertaining programming to attract audiences and maintain ratings (Hamilton, 2004). Often this leads to a focus on provocative and sensational stories about crime, celebrities, gossip and scandal (Patterson, 2013). These “soft news” sources have little incentive to cover substantial government corruption and financial misconduct. Instead, they must provide more infotainment, or entertaining news programming, in order to compete for audience attention among other news outlets and pure entertainment sources such as made-for-TV movies, fiction, online porn, video games and so forth (Fallows, 1997; McChesney, 2004; Patterson, 2013). With so many alternative sources of entertainment vying for audience attention, “soft news” sources must constantly focus on sensational stories, particularly sex scandals to bring in viewers.

As shown in Figure 4, all four “soft news” sources gave more overall coverage to cases of political sexual misconduct than financial misconduct. The evidence supports H3B. A series of one-tailed t-tests were conducted to determine differences in financial and sexual scandal coverage by source. The t-tests showed significantly more sex scandal coverage by The Today Show  $t(4,155) = 2.21, p < .05$ , The Early Show  $t(4,155) = p < .10$ , Good Morning America  $t(4,155) = 3.58, p < .001$ , and The Huffington Post news website  $t(4,155) = 2.69, p < .01$ . Across all sources, sex scandals were given more overall attention than financial scandals. An alternative figure



using the proportion of all stories covered revealed a similar pattern of findings. Across each soft news outlet, sex scandal coverage far outpaces coverage of financial scandals.

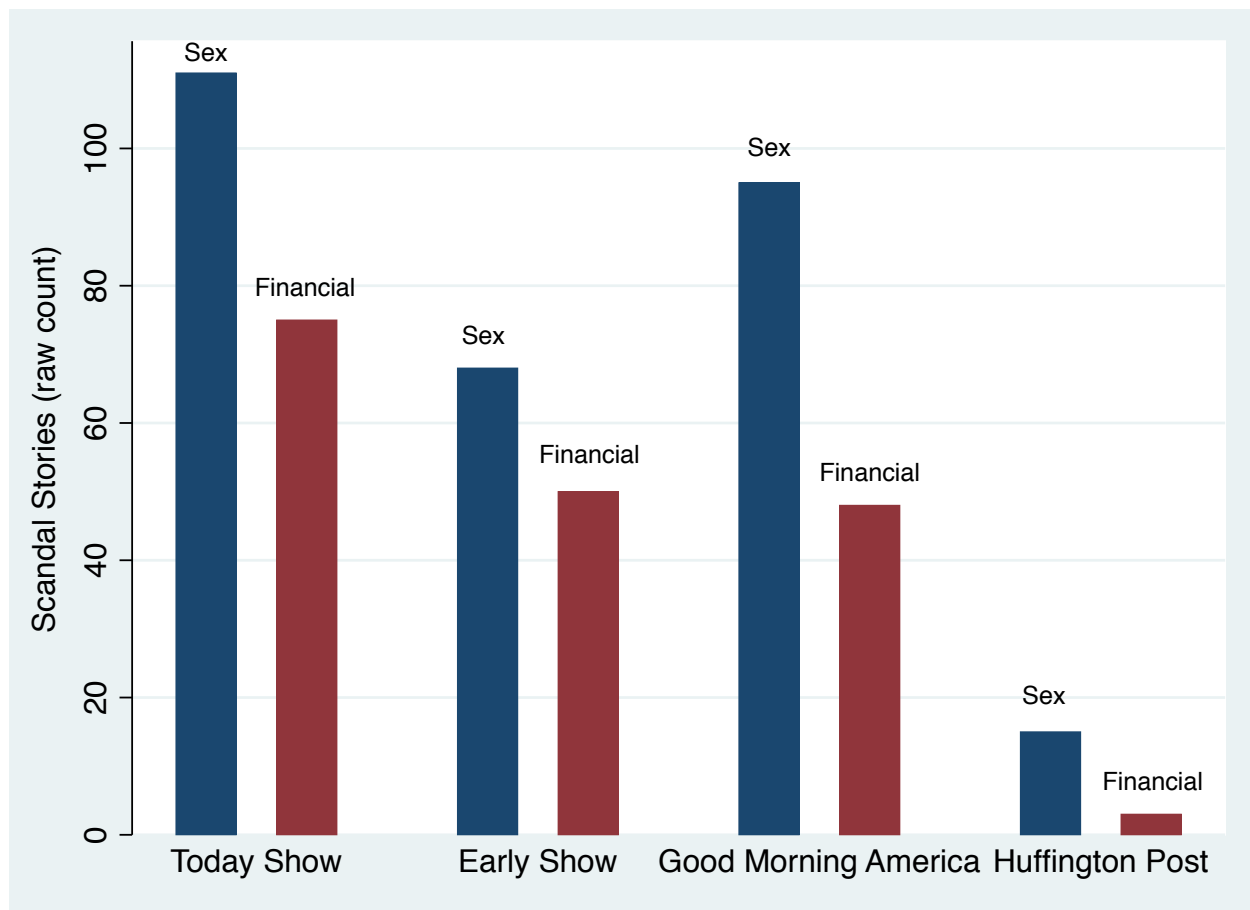


Figure 4.  
Frequency of Financial and Sexual Scandal Stories by “Soft News” Source

Note: Frequencies derived from Pew News Coverage Index (NCI), covering 27 cases of political scandal and 4,157 stories from Jan. 1 2007 to May 31 2012.

**Partisan Coverage.** A prevailing characteristic of the cable TV news environment is that there is partisan bias in coverage (Feldman, 2011; Morris, 2005; 2007; Stroud, 2011). Due to the editorial slant of particular cable TV news outlets, coverage of ordinary political events becomes distorted, interpreted through the partisan lens of the outlet’s producers, reporters, and anchors.

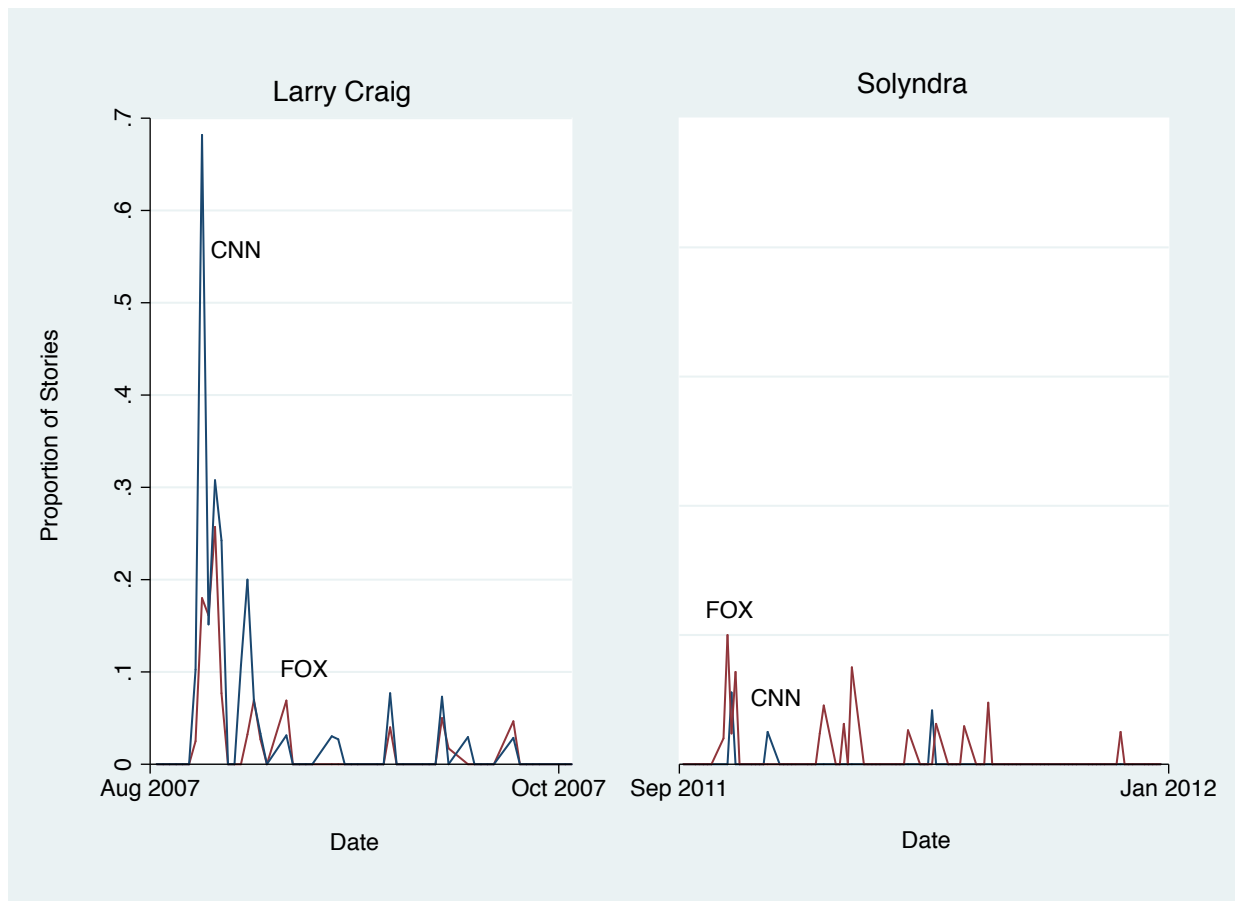


Figure 5.  
Proportion of CNN and Fox News Stories about Scandal

Note: The heavy blue line represents the proportion of CNN stories about the Larry Craig sex scandal and the proportion of CNN stories about the Solyndra scandal. The heavy blue line represents the proportion of Fox News stories about the Larry Craig sex scandal and the proportion of Fox News stories about the Solyndra scandal. The X-axis represents time – Aug. 2007 to Oct. 2007 (Craig), Sep. 2011 to Jan. 2012 (Solyndra).

A one-tailed t-test was conducted to compare how partisan cable outlets cover Democratic and Republican scandals. This test assessed mean differences in Republican and Democratic scandal stories broadcast by Fox News Channel and CNN ( $n = 1,166$ ). Assuming that Fox typically represents a conservative Republican viewpoint and CNN is more likely to provide a liberal Democratic viewpoint (Feldman, 2011; Morris, 2005; Stroud, 2008; 2011), the

prediction is that Fox will pay more attention to scandals that may reflect poorly on Democrats (H4A), and CNN will pay more attention to scandals reflecting poorly on Republicans (H4B).

The results show support for H4A and H4B. A one-tailed t-test shows a significant difference in scandal stories  $t(1,164) = 3.42, p < .001$ , with CNN providing more coverage ( $M = 0.31, SD = 0.46$ ) to Republican scandals than Fox ( $M = 0.22, SD = 0.41$ ). This test also suggests the inverse, that CNN paid less attention to Democratic scandals ( $M = 0.69, SD = 0.46$ ) than did Fox News ( $M = 0.78, SD = 0.41$ ). The results suggest that there is partisan bias in scandal coverage, with opposition officials receiving more scandal news than likeminded officials.

Two cases that illustrate partisan bias in scandal coverage are represented in Figure 5. This figure shows the proportion of all CNN and Fox News stories that specifically discussed former Republican Senator Larry Craig's sex scandal and the Solyndra controversy plaguing the Democratic administration of President Obama. When the scandal hurt Republicans (Larry Craig), the blue trend line representing CNN scandal stories outpaces the red trend line representing Fox stories. The reverse is true of scandals that hurt Democrats (Solyndra).

In the case of Larry Craig, who was arrested for soliciting sex in an Idaho airport men's room (New York Times, 2007), CNN provided an initial surge of coverage followed by sporadic attention in the succeeding months. Fox downplayed the Craig scandal relative to CNN, providing fewer initial stories and lighter coverage long term. The Solyndra controversy, which involved a possibly illegal government restructuring of a \$535 million loan to the Solyndra solar energy company (Stephens & Leonnig, 2011), demonstrated an opposite pattern. CNN paid little attention to Solyndra relative to Fox, who kept the story alive with continuing coverage.

It is also notable that the initial coverage of the Larry Craig sex scandal was more intense than the initial coverage of Solyndra. While many other factors relating to time and "agenda

congestion” could influence how intensely a particular topic receives initial coverage (Boydston, 2013; Nyhan, 2014), the graphs illustrated in Figure 5 show CNN and Fox paying more attention to a provocative, high profile sex scandal than an equally high profile financial controversy.

### **Discussion**

Press coverage of political scandal does not appear, “properly calibrated” (Entman, 2012, p. 2) to the severity of the allegations. Financial scandals can do considerable damage to the public’s trust in government, creating doubt about the honesty of officials, and possibly generating legal complications. The majority of official sexual indiscretions are private matters that do little harm to the daily business of government, or to society, excepting any illegal sexual activity. Why then, does the press give more attention, on average, to relatively trivial political sex scandals, while dubious financial dealings of national officials are downplayed?

One answer explored in this chapter focuses on the role of media incentives and institutional routines. Perhaps the most crucial set of incentives discussed in this study are economic: the desire of a news organization to make profits by using entertaining and salacious political scandal news to increase audience size and sell advertising (Hamilton, 2004). Since sex scandals often involve simple and provocative narratives, the journalistic community may view them as low-hanging fruit. In a world of intense market competition and shrinking news budgets (Arnold, 2006), a sex scandal may represent an easy opportunity to generate more audience interest in news products, resulting in increases in advertising revenues. Consistent with Patterson (1994, p. 36), it appears that, in the case of political scandal, the norms of the news business may be at odds with the norms of politics. While financial scandals often violate democratic, ethical and legal norms, they are usually given less media attention than are sex

scandals (H1). The implication is that the news media does not weigh carefully normative concerns about scandal typology when deciding how much attention a transgression receives.

In fact, it appears that the press may place economic incentives and institutional routines before democratic values. With declining newsroom budgets and fewer personnel, news organizations may place more stock in covering provocative stories about sex scandals, stories that receive and sustain audience attention. Simultaneously, the press may be increasingly unable, or unwilling, to invest dwindling resources in the probing of more complex financial scandals. At the end of the day, it instead may simply be more cost effective and convenient to allow officials to release statements disclosing scandal details, and to write scandal news based off of official statements. As long as officials are making statements about a scandal, institutional routines demand coverage. It appears the one effective way at mitigating coverage is for an official to resign quickly. Scandal coverage is driven in part by the media's institutional routines, routines that also be leveraged to eliminate coverage. Nevertheless, resigning an official position is tantamount to electoral defeat, and represents the loss of both substantive and symbolic power.

Patterns of scandal news coverage are influenced by news media sector. Radio outlets tend to focus more on financial scandals than sexual scandals (H2A), while online and network television news mediums provide more coverage to sexual misconduct relative to financial malfeasance (H2B). It is plausible that the format of mediums like radio that do not rely on visuals, are able to provide more in-depth coverage of financial scandals. Oddly, and counter to the hypotheses, major print newspapers that tend to focus on "hard news" and cable television networks that tend to focus on "soft news" paid roughly equal attention to sexual and financial scandal. It is possible that some news sources within each media sector alter these broad patterns.

This study analyzed four “hard news” sources and four “soft news” sources for evidence of differential sexual and financial scandal coverage. While The New York Times and The Wall Street Journal provided equal amounts of attention to sexual and financial scandals, the PBS NewsHour with Jim Lehrer and NPR’s Morning Edition and Talk of the Nation provided gave more coverage to financial scandals (H3A). One explanation for this may be that PBS and NPR are non-profit media organizations. There is less motivation for PBS and NPR to increase audience attention (and advertising revenues) by promoting salacious sex scandals. H3B predicted that “soft news” sources would provide more attention to controversial and provocative sexual misconduct than the relatively complex and bureaucratic financial scandal scenario. This hypothesis was supported. The Today Show, The Early Show, Good Morning America, and The Huffington Post news website all provided more attention to sexual misbehavior than the financial misdeeds of elected officials. This does not imply that the sources ignored breaking events surrounding financial scandal. It does suggest that financial scandals may be viewed as less newsworthy or less appealing by editors, producers, or reporters at these particular outlets.

Partisan calculations also influence patterns of scandal news coverage (H4A and H4B). Human beings are motivated to protect members of their social (Tajfel, 1982) and political groups (Huddy, 2013), and previous research shows evidence of partisan bias in news coverage (Morris, 2005; Stroud, 2011), in particular, newspaper coverage of political scandal (Pugilisi & Snyder, 2011). Consistent with previous research, this chapter demonstrates a partisan mechanism in cable TV news coverage, with conservative-leaning Fox News providing relatively more attention to scandals that may damage the reputation of liberal and Democratic officials. The same partisan bias was found with regard to CNN, the liberal-leaning news outlet. CNN paid more attention to scandals that may harm the reputations of Republican officials.

There are at least two ramifications of the partisan nature of scandal coverage, demonstrated by Fox and CNN. First, partisan coverage may engender biased perceptions of, and memories about, political reality (Morris, 2005; Stroud, 2011). Individuals who only watch Fox, in this case, may come away from programming believing that the Republican Party is relatively scandal-free, while the Democrats are swindlers and sex fiends. CNN viewers may hold a reverse pattern of impressions about officials. Additionally, partisan coverage may enhance partisan polarization among citizens. Accusations hurled at members of the opposition party may reinforce a perception that opposition party members are “others” or outsiders that are not part of their own political group (Tafjel, 1982; Huddy, 2013), possibly delegitimizing their power or their perceived right to govern. In either event, partisan influences on scandal coverage may have real-world effects that lead to miscalculated punishments at the ballot box, distorted partisan perceptions and increased polarization. Future research could explore the impact of partisan scandal coverage on perceptions, polarization and voter turnout in national elections.

## CHAPTER 3. INDIVIDUAL EVALUATIONS

### Introduction

The world of politics is distant and the halls of power remote. Average citizens receive only fleeting glimpses of national and international political events, mostly through news media. Accordingly, the press holds considerable sway over a citizen's view of political reality (see Lippmann, 1997). Scandal information, for instance, is not brought to the citizen raw and undigested, but is rather filtered through the gatekeeping processes of the press, with journalists and editors deciding the words, phrases and structure belonging to political scandal narratives. The manner and frequency in which news reports political scandals may, in turn, have real effects on audience evaluations of the accused, possibly leading to electoral defeat, distraction from party goals, and the mitigation or elimination of the symbolic power of reputation and trustworthiness. In this sense, the press holds all the cards. Only through press publicity can officials' misbehavior reach the level of "scandal" (see Entman, 2012; Marion, 2010; Thompson, 2000). Without the watchful eye of the press and its ability to publicize scandal, crosscutting accusations of official misconduct would fall on deaf ears. For a scandal to be a scandal, it must involve the press and its ability to investigate and magnify the events in question.

When citizens encounter a news report about a financial or sex scandal, how do they evaluate the accused official? A number of empirical studies have examined individual-level factors that influence scandal evaluations. In general, scandals that raise questions about financial malfeasance are evaluated more harshly than scandals about moral or sexual violations, unless the violation involves an additional abuse of power related to the actions in question (Doherty et al., 2011; Sigal et al., 1988). Other factors include the race and gender of the official (Berinsky et al., 2011; Carlson et al., 2000), the official's personal traits such as warmth and



competence (Funk 1996), prior public opinion of the official (Fischle, 2000; Zaller, 1998), the public's preexisting levels of cynicism (Dancey, 2011), perceived party support of the accused official (Stewart, Rose, Rosales, Rudney, Lehner, Miltich, Snyder & Sadecki, 2013), ideologically motivated adherence to specific moral values like Fairness or Sanctity (Haidt, 2012), and the methods that the official employs to impression manage scandal accusations, including a denial of the accusations or publicly acknowledging scandal claims and issuing a formal apology (McGraw, 1991; Sigal et al., 1988; Smith, Smith Powers, & Suarez, 2005).

This chapter explores the impact of scandal publicity on individual-level evaluations using a survey-experimental method. The analysis focuses on differences in evaluations caused by typological differences: financial vs. sexual misconduct. It also accounts for group and ideologically motivated processing of scandal information. Citizens often report possessing different ideological orientations – liberal or conservative – that may influence how they judge a scandal affecting a representative of their affiliated group, in this case, the Democratic Party or Republican Party. Moreover, ideologically motivated values such as Fairness and Sanctity may also influence evaluations. Since conservatives often make moral evaluations on the basis of the Sanctity / Degradation moral value dimension, it is expected that conservatives will respond more negatively to a sex scandal than will liberals. The role of political knowledge in scandal evaluations is also considered. Political knowledge has been linked to improved policy attitude stability (Sturgis & Smith, 2010) and a variety of other beneficial outcomes (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Gomez & Wilson, 2001). Individuals with high levels of political knowledge may be able to make sense of scandal consequences, doling out harsher punishments to officials accused of financial scandals than officials accused of sex scandals. Alternatively, political knowledge has been shown to bias information processing, such that knowledgeable individuals

are more receptive to partisan news frames (Chong & Druckman, 2007a; 2007b; Druckman, et al. 2013). Having vast stores of political knowledge means the individual is better able to connect the gamesmanship in partisan message framing to beliefs held by their side of the political aisle. In a scandal scenario, knowledgeable individuals may therefore put an equally harsh punishment on an official accused of a sex scandal than a similar official accused of financial misconduct.

### **Method**

**Data.** To investigate individual evaluations of financial and sex scandals, an experiment was embedded in a survey available to participants through Amazon.com's Mechanical Turk system for the time period of December 16 to December 23, 2013. The Mechanical Turk system allows any United States citizen over the age of 18 with an Amazon account to participate in various human intelligence tasks (HITs) in exchange for a small monetary reward. Sampling from the Mechanical Turk participant pool is not random, as participants self-select a given task, including surveys listed in the system. However, Mechanical Turk samples are more representative of the U.S. population than student samples and other types of convenience samples (Berinsky, Huber, and Lenz 2012), lending external validity to experimental results.

Using an automated randomizer in the Qualtrics survey software program, participants (n = 148) were randomly presented with one of four conditions involving a news story about a fictitious U.S. Senator, "Sam Hall," a Republican or Democrat who has been accused of improper financial or sexual behavior. Each news story stimulus was designed using Adobe InDesign software and was made to appear as realistic as possible (see Appendix B). Participants were told that the news story recently appeared in "a major daily newspaper."

There were four treatments in which Senator Hall's party cue – Republican or Democrat – and scandal cue – financial or sexual – were manipulated. Consistent with previous research

(Berinsky, Hutchings, Mendelberg, Shaker, & Valentino, 2011; Conover 1981), manipulating cues in this 2X2 full factorial design theoretically allows the study to isolate the effects of financial and sexual scandal types on evaluations of the official, while accounting for the official's party identification. Overall, the party identification cue was explicitly manipulated in three prominent locations in each treatment stimuli, including the lead paragraph and the photo caption. The scandal cue was manipulated seven times, including the headline of the article by alternating the words "improper sexual relationships" with "improper use of campaign funds."

Table 2.  
Descriptive Statistics for Individual-Level Evaluations Analysis

	<b>M or %</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>Range</b>
<b>Moderating Variables</b>			
Female	49.32%	---	0 = male, 1 = female
Age	36.64	13.58	18 to 74 years
Black	13.51%	---	0 = not black, 1 = black
Hispanic	5.41%	---	0 = not Hispanic, 1 = Hispanic
Education	15.03	1.78	10 to 18 years
Income	\$32,331	---	\$7,500 to \$100,000 annually
Church Attendance	0.99	1.41	0 = never, 5 = more than once/week
Republican	14.86%	---	0 = not Republican, 1 = Republican
Democrat	49.32%	---	0 = not Democrat, 1 = Democrat
Conservative	2.66	1.80	0 = very liberal, 6 = very conservative
Political Involvement	1.99	0.67	0 to 4
Political Knowledge	0.82	0.23	0 to 1
<b>Independent Variables</b>			
Party Cue	0.51	0.50	0 = Democratic cue, 1 = Republican cue
Scandal Type Cue	0.49	0.50	0 = Sexual cue, 1 = Financial cue
<b>Dependent Variable</b>			
Evaluation	22.82	20.90	0 to 100

Note: n = 148.

**Measures. Sample Demographics.** A standard block of demographic questions was assessed (Table 2). These included sex, age, ethnicity, years of formal educational, and annual income. Since religiosity may be a predictor of attitudes toward sexual or financial misconduct, participants were also asked how often they attended church or a place of worship, from “never” to “more than once a week.” Party identification was measured by asking participants whether they identified as a Republican, Democrat, or Independent. Political ideology, the primary moderating variable, was measured on a 7-point Likert scale that asked participants if they considered themselves very liberal to very conservative ( $M = 2.66$ ,  $sd = 1.80$ , range 0 to 6).

This study also measured political interest and knowledge. Political interest was measured using five items. Two of these items have been used in the past to assess interest as long-term interest in politics (Jin, An, & Simon, 2009). These items asked participants, “how involved in politics would you say you currently are?” and, “in the past, how much have you been interested in political campaign during election times?” Two other items asked, “how much do you enjoy keeping up with the news?”; “how much do you enjoy news about national politics?”; and, “how much do you enjoy talking about politics with family, friends, or peers?” A principal components factor analysis revealed a single dimension to these items. Subsequently, the items were combined into a composite scale ( $M = 1.99$ ,  $sd = .67$ , range = 0 to 4,  $\alpha = .84$ ).

Political knowledge was assessed with the five-item index recommended by Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996). Close-ended items were used that asked participants if they could identify the vice president (Joe Biden), whose responsibility it is to determine if a law is constitutional (the Supreme Court), how much of a majority is required for Congress to override a presidential veto (2/3 majority), which party has the majority in the House of Representatives (Republican Party),

and which party is more conservative at the national level (Republican Party). These items were combined into an composite index ( $M = .82$ ,  $sd = .23$ , range = 0 to 1,  $\alpha = .65$ ).

**Independent Variables.** The primary independent variable was random exposure to the experimental treatments (Appendix B). Participants were randomly exposed to a news story involving a Republican or Democratic official (party cue) accused of financial or sexual misconduct (scandal type cue). Each story uses similar language to describe the scandal scenario, and was informationally similar, except for details specific to the type of scandal described. Treatment groups were approximately balanced, with  $n = 34$  assigned to each treatment.

**Dependent Variable.** Evaluations of the accused official, Senator Sam Hall, were assessed using a 100-point feeling thermometer. This measure is identical to those currently used in the American National Election Study (ANES). After exposure to one of the news stimuli, all participants were asked, “to indicate how you feel about Senator Sam Hall” from 0 (very negative attitude) to 100 (very positive attitude) ( $M = 22.82$ ,  $sd = 20.90$ , range = 0 to 83).

### **Procedure**

Since the dependent variable was interval-level, the appropriate statistical modeling procedure was ordinary least squares (OLS) regression (Cohen, Cohen, West & Aiken, 2002; Kennedy, 2005). The main effects of receiving the Republican or Democratic party cue manipulation, and receiving the Financial or Sexual scandal cue manipulation were entered in Model 1 as independent variables, along with interaction terms in Model 2.

### **Results**

The analysis first examines the main effects of the party cue and the scandal type cue on evaluations of the accused official, Senator Sam Hall (Table 3). Two models are shown in Table 3: Model 1 is unconditional and Model 2 shows results with interactions entered.

Table 3.  
OLS Regression Predicting Individual-Level Scandal Evaluations

	<u>Model 1</u>		<u>Model 2</u>	
	b (SE)	$\beta$	b (SE)	$\beta$
Party Cue	-4.09 (3.38)	-0.10	-3.85 (3.36)	-0.09
Scandal Type Cue	-6.93 (3.32)	-0.17*	-8.71 (3.33)	-0.21*
Ideology	-1.09 (0.93)	-0.09	-1.40 (0.97)	-0.12
Knowledge	-23.46 (7.38)	-0.26**	-26.53 (7.54)	-0.29**
Party Cue X Scandal Type Cue	---	---	-0.22 (1.70)	-0.01
Party Cue X Ideology	---	---	2.97 (1.71)	0.14 <sup>†</sup>
Scandal Type Cue X Ideology	---	---	-0.99 (1.69)	-0.05
Ideology X Knowledge	---	---	4.12 (2.20)	0.16 <sup>†</sup>
Party Cue X Knowledge	---	---	1.62 (1.84)	0.07
Scandal Type Cue X Knowledge	---	---	5.04 (1.94)	0.23*
Constant	50.62 (7.63)	---	55.33 (8.06)	---
N	148		148	
R <sup>2</sup>	9.62%		17.97%	

Note: Party cue is coded with Republican = 1. Scandal type cue is coded with sex scandals = 1. The dependent variable is evaluations of the target Senator, coded 0 (negative) to 100 (positive). \*\*p<.01, \*p<.05, <sup>†</sup>p<.10

This study did not make specific predictions about the main effect of party cue on participant evaluations, since it is assumed that participant evaluations of the accused official will be at least partially based on participant political ideology, which should mitigate the main

effect of the target official's party affiliation. Indeed, there was no main effect of the party cue on evaluations of the official. There was, however, a main effect of the scandal type cue on evaluations of the official ( $\beta = -0.26$ ,  $p < .01$ ). This effect is illustrated in Figure 6.

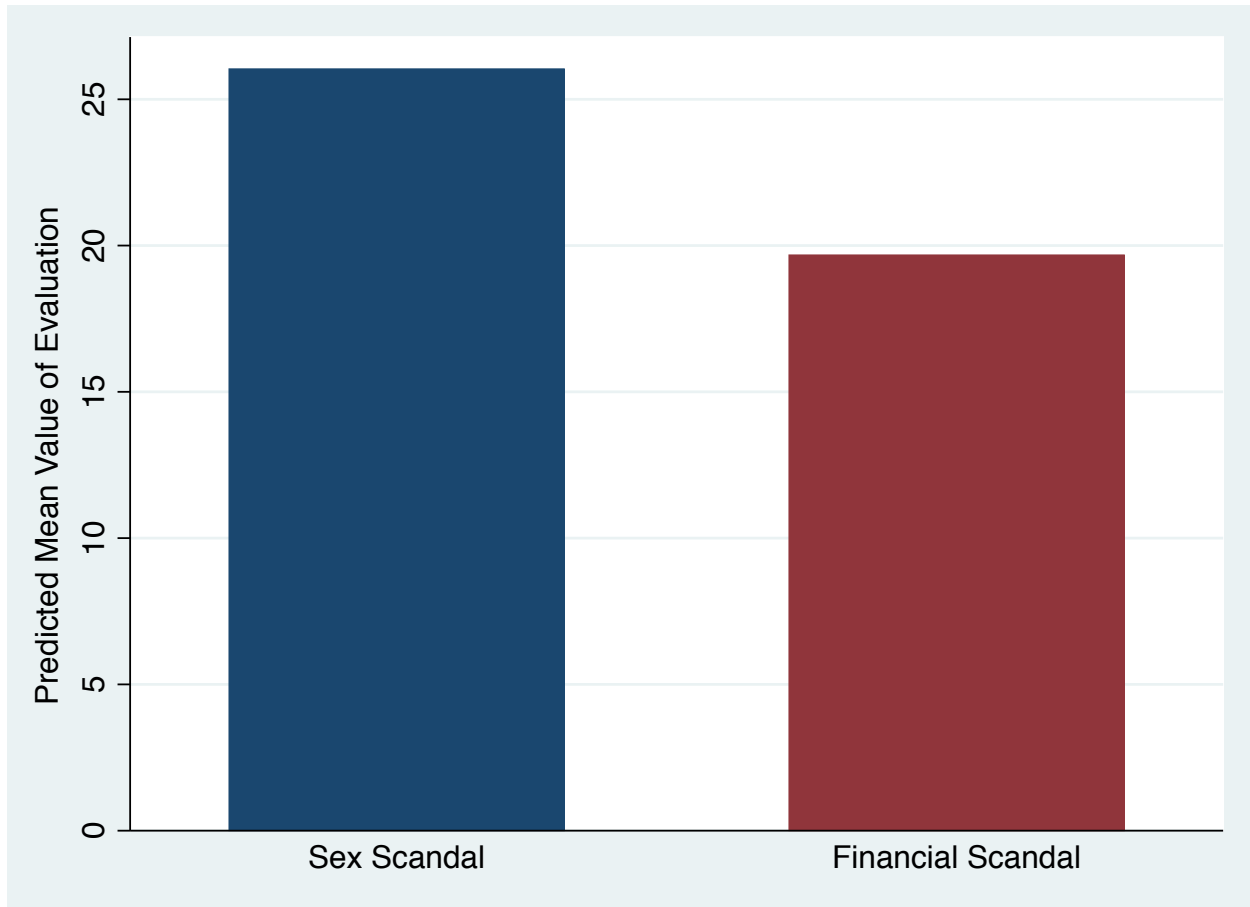


Figure 6.  
Effect of Scandal Type Cue on Evaluations of Accused Official

Note:  $n = 148$ . The Y-axis shows predicted values on a 100-point feeling thermometer, generated from Table 3, model 1. Bars indicate scandal type.

Here, a negative coefficient indicates that exposure to the financial scandal treatment related to more negative evaluations of the accused official. It also indicates that exposure to the sex scandal treatment led to slightly more positive evaluations. H5, which predicted learning about an official's financial misconduct would result in more negative evaluations than learning

about sexual misconduct, therefore receives support. Everything else equal, individuals are more punitive toward officials accused of financial malfeasance than sexual dalliances.

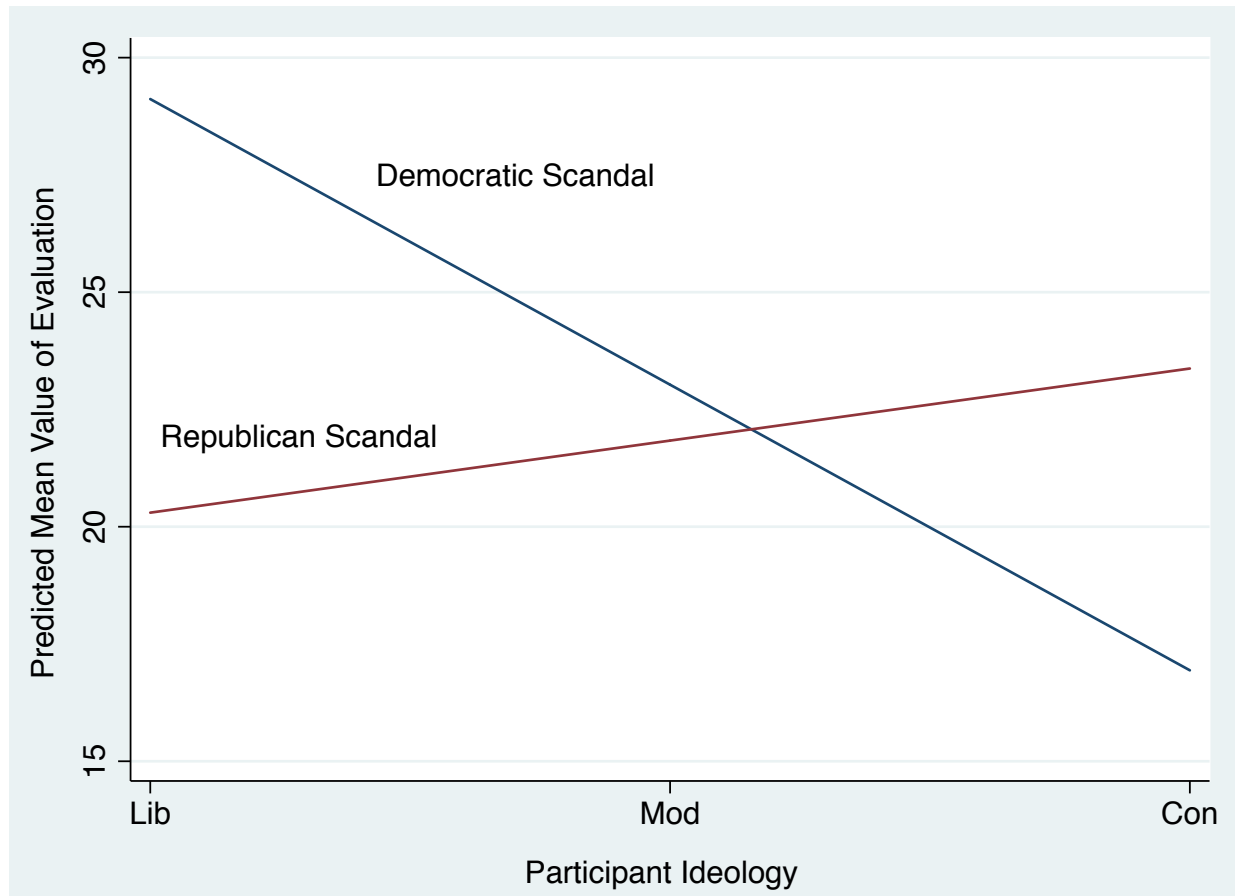


Figure 7.  
Interaction Between Party Cue and Participant Ideology

Note:  $n = 148$ .

The Y-axis represents the predicted value of evaluations, by participant ideology and scandal type. Predicted values were generated from Table 3, model 2. Trend lines indicate party cue.

There was no direct effect of participant ideology on the outcome variable. Again, this was not expected, as there should be an interactive effect between participant ideology and receiving information about a likeminded or opposition party official. Indeed, there is an



interactive relationship between participant ideology and party cue ( $\beta = 0.18, p < .05$ ). This relationship is illustrated in Figure 7 by plotting predicted values by ideology and party cue.

As shown in the figure, conservative participants give more positive evaluations on a Republican official accused of scandal and more negative evaluations of a Democrat. The reverse is true of liberal participants, who made more negative evaluations of the Republican, and relatively more positive evaluations of the Democrat. H6A predicted that conservatives would be more negative toward a Democrat accused of scandal than a Republican. H6A receives support. H6B expected that liberals would be more negative toward a Republican, and relatively more positive evaluations of a Democrat accused of scandal. H6B is supported. Consistent with research showing humans naturally protect members of their group (Brewer, 1979; Tajfel 1982), including their political groups (Huddy, 2013), these results suggest liberals and conservatives consider the party affiliation of the accused official when making evaluations about them.

Based on the assumption that ideologically motivated moral values concerning Fairness and bodily Sanctity may influence scandal evaluations (Graham et al., 2009; Haidt, 2013), H7A and H7B predicted an interaction between participant ideology and scandal type. The results do not support H7A or H7B. There was no interaction between participant ideology and the type of scandal described in the treatments – financial or sexual – suggesting that moral values associated with political ideology may not exert independent effects on evaluations of the accused official. Nevertheless, it appears that officials accused of a sex scandal are generally evaluated more positively than officials accused of financial scandals.

H8A and H8B predicted an interactive relationship between the level of participant political knowledge and scandal type. Here it was predicted that high knowledge levels of knowledge would place harsh evaluations on an official accused of financial misconduct than would individuals with low knowledge levels (H8A). Conversely, it was expected that individuals with high knowledge levels may rate officials accused of sex scandals more harshly than low knowledge individuals (H8B). The evidence supports H8B.

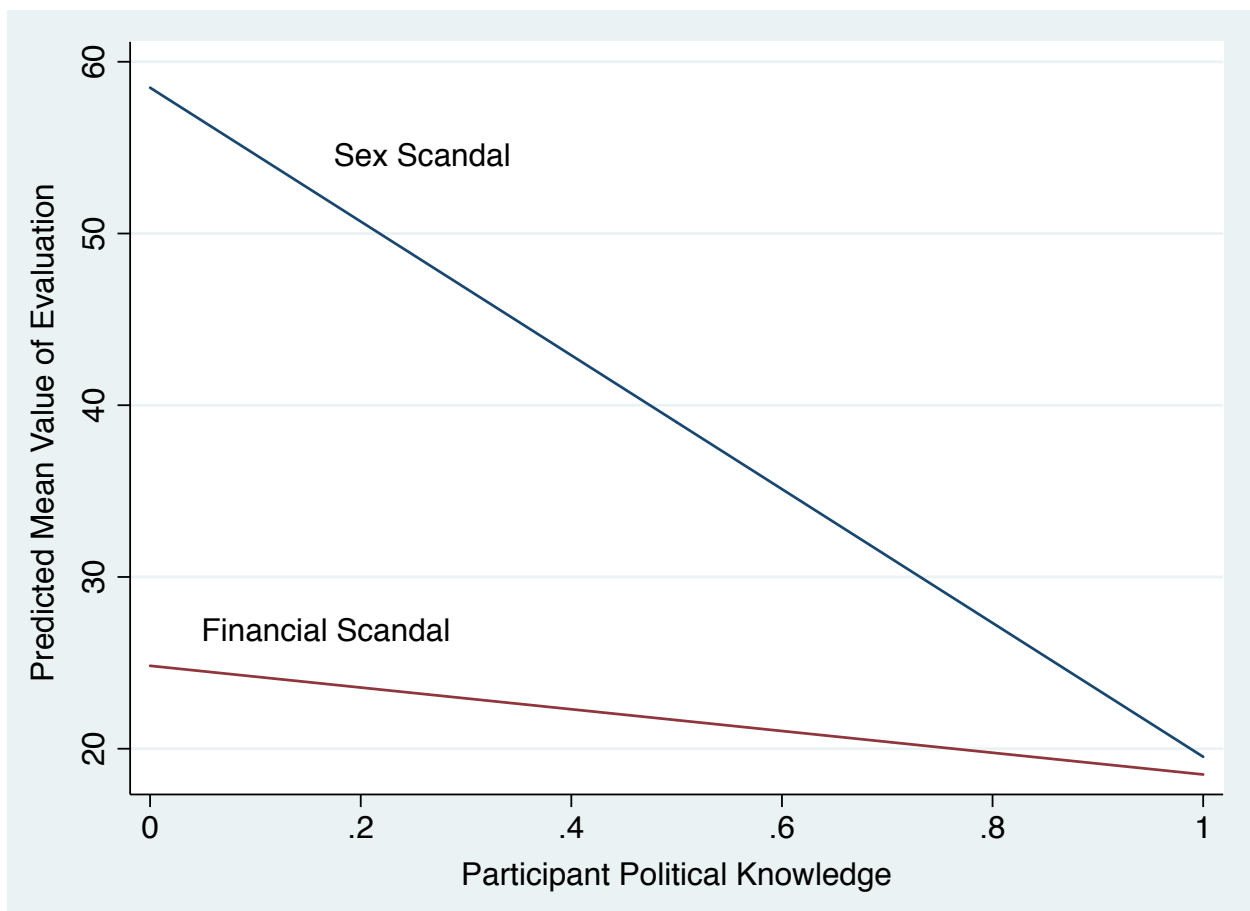


Figure 8.  
Interaction Between Scandal Type Cue and Political Knowledge

Note:  $n = 148$ .

The Y-axis represents the predicted value of evaluations, by political knowledge and scandal type. Predicted values generated from Table 3, model 2. Trend lines indicate scandal type cue.

There was a significant interaction between participant political knowledge and scandal type ( $\beta = 0.23$ ,  $p < .05$ ). As shown in Figure 8, going from the minimum to the maximum value of the political knowledge scale resulted in a 40-point decrease in mean evaluation scores for participants exposed to the sex scandal cue. Participants with high knowledge levels appeared to judge the sex scandal more negatively than individuals with low levels of knowledge. A similar pattern of results is found with regard to financial scandals, to a lesser degree. The more knowledgeable the participant, the lower the mean evaluation for an official accused of a financial scandal. However, even participants who scored zero on the knowledge scale judged an official accused financial misconduct more severely than an official accused of an affair.

### **Discussion**

Democratic citizens must perform a number of duties. To be considered “active” and “engaged” members of their polity, they must participate in the popular election of government representatives; they must serve on juries of their peers; they may elect to serve as civic leaders in their local communities, or at the state or national level; they must be willing to be drafted into the armed services in times of military conflict; and they must be willing, at times, to remove popular but corrupt representatives from office (Clawson & Oxley, 2012).

In this chapter, a survey-experiment demonstrated that citizens are willing and able to penalize representatives who cheat them financially. Citizens also punish representatives accused of sex scandals, but not to the same degree as representatives accused of financial misconduct. Combined, these results suggest that citizens are “rational,” insofar as they appear to recognize typological differences in scandal severity when making evaluations about the accused, punish members of the opposition partisan group more harshly than members of their own group, and are not swayed by rather rigid moral values in assessing officials accused of sexual and financial

indiscretions. Evaluations of scandal allegations appear to be driven by rational calculations to protect members of one's political group (Huddy, 2013) and to preserve representative power in Washington, rather than a moral judgment about the official's conduct.

These results can be interpreted optimistically. As hypothesized (H4), individuals deposit more negative evaluations on more severe offenses of public trust, in this case, financial scandals. Financial scandals represent violations of a person's duty as an elected representative, violating norms of democracy, as well as ethical and legal norms. Sex scandals can involve activities that violate each of these norms, but they are often merely private violations of social mores governing what is considered "correct" or "acceptable" sexual behavior. Citizens respond negatively to accusations of sexual scandal, but they appear to account for the egregiousness of the offense, adjusting evaluations to meet the severity of the alleged misconduct. Consistent with previous analyses (Doherty et al., 2011; Sigal et al. 1988), it seems that citizens are able to make distinctions in scandal severity. However, this assumes that citizens receive equitable information about various scandal accusations. This is not a safe assumption, as news media tend to focus on sexual scandals to a greater extent than they do less salacious financial scandals.

Citizens also appear to make group-related calculations about scandal. Human beings have a natural affinity for, and are predisposed to protect members of their group (Peters, 1979; Tajfel, 1982). In the realm of politics, this includes protecting partisans who identify with your ideological identity (Huddy, 2013). This chapter found evidence to support the prediction that ideology sways evaluations of accused representatives (H5A and H5B). Liberals and conservatives evaluate members of their group negatively in wake of a scandal, but evaluate the opposition party members even more negatively. This is quite rational, considering that partisan officials theoretically represent one's political interests in larger governing bodies. A scandal

threatens an official's reputation and trust, raises the possibility that he or she will be removed from office, and will no longer be able to represent the citizen's interests. Given this knowledge, citizens are less willing to punish members of a group who likely promote their own interests.

Moral judgments related to political ideology do not appear to play a significant role in individual assessments of scandal. Specifically, the moral value dimensions of Fairness / Cheating and Sanctity / Degradation do not appear alter assessments of scandal (Graham et al., 2009; Haidt, 2012). Counter to the prediction (H6A and H6B), there was not a significant interaction between participant ideology and scandal type, suggesting that moral values associated with ideology do not play a major role in scandal evaluations, all else being equal.

One explanation for this finding may be that the fictitious scandal scenario was not sensational or vivid enough to trigger feelings of moral outrage. To trigger disgust, the moral foundations approach uses scenarios describing sexual relations that are often considered deviant (e.g., homosexual relations), designed to activate judgments based on the Sanctity / Degradation value (Haidt, 2012). The stimuli used in this study may not have been effective at activating this value, since it was a news story providing a detached depiction of improper relations between a congressman and a mistress (Appendix B). It is possible that treatments highlighting more salacious sex scandals could prime the Sanctity / Degradation value dimension, subsequently altering scandal judgments. Likewise, stories that emphasize an official's lack of fairness to his constituents may prompt evaluations based on the Fairness / Cheating value.

Political knowledge also plays a key role in scandal evaluations (H8A and H8B). The evidence suggests that judgments about officials accused of misconduct is shaped by the participant's level of political sophistication. Participants with high levels of knowledge appear less capable of processing the magnitude of the misconduct, assigning more negative evaluations

to sexual misconduct than their low-knowledge counterparts (H8B). Low knowledge participants, compared to high knowledge individuals, gave a much more positive rating to officials accused of an extramarital affair, suggesting that low knowledge participants may not have been able to attach the information about scandal to their prior beliefs.

Since knowledge is related to making what could be called “partisan errors” in information processing (Chong & Druckman, 2007a; 2007b; Druckman et al., 2013), it appears that knowledge also motivates selective processing of scandal information. Rather than being able to gauge the severity of scandal, knowledge may motivate citizens to connect news about the “game” of politics – scandal, in this case – to their prior partisan affiliations and ideological orientations. This translates into more negative evaluations of an official accused of sexual dalliances. Individuals at every level of knowledge, meanwhile, judged officials accused financial misconduct more negatively than officials accused of sexual misbehavior.

Ironically, the results presented in this chapter suggest that citizens tend to exact stiff punishments on officials accused of financial fraud while forgiving officials of extramarital affairs. Citizens treat scandal severity in exactly the opposite manner than do journalists. Whereas the press obsesses over the private sexual liaisons of public officials, citizens appear more cautious about officials who take their constituents tax dollars. This pattern of citizen judgment suggests that democracy may benefit from increased media attention to financial misconduct. Assuming that citizens receive news about financial malfeasance, it appears that citizens will use such information to punish officials accused of severe breaches of democratic, legal and ethical norms. Yet financial scandals tend to receive little media scrutiny, leaving citizens unaware, or marginally aware of their representatives’ financial misconduct.

## CHAPTER 4. ELECTORAL OUTCOMES

### Introduction

Political scandals have routinely plagued the United States Congress (Farquhar, 2003). During the past decade, intense public and media scrutiny has resulted in both major political parties losing Congressional seats in the aftermath of a scandal (Basinger, 2013; Marion, 2010; Praino et al., 2013). To date, several studies have examined factors that affect an official's survivability after scandal accusations are made, focusing primarily on the impact of publicity on post-scandal electoral survivability. For instance, Herrick (2000) found that the frequency of Washington Post stories about a House scandal related negatively to House member electoral security. Similarly, Shea (1999) found that frequency of negative local news stories adversely impacted a congressman's electoral "survivability," or the ability to avoid resignation and win reelection. In a more recent analysis, Ulbig and Miller (2012) found that news coverage of gubernatorial scandal related to declines in public support for the accused. Examining presidential scandals, Entman (2012) found a "cascading" effect of scandal publicity involving a reinforcing cycle of opposition party claims, press coverage, and public response. During election periods, the decision for the opposition to pursue scandal may have particularly damaging effects on the incumbent official's electoral prospects (Fogarty, 2013).

Previous research has also examined the impact of scandal media coverage and other, personal and institutional factors on electoral outcomes in subsequent election cycles. For instance, examining the House banking scandal of 1992, Jacobson and Dimock (1994) found that the members implicated suffered at the ballot box. As the authors put it, "the House banking scandal was the major reason for the unusually high turnover of House seats in 1992. It contributed significantly to exit from the House by all routes: retirement, defeat in the primary

election, and defeat in the general election” (p. 621). Other studies have reached similar conclusions about the House banking scandal and other types of financial and sexual misconduct (Ahuja, Beavers, Berreau, Dodson, Hibbing, Hourigan, Showalter, & Walz, 1994; Basinger, 2013; Groseclose & Krehbiel, 1994; Stewart, 1994; Welch & Hibbing, 1997). Both financial and sexual scandals have real electoral consequences, affecting public opinion, the outcome of elections and vote share in subsequent election cycles (Brown, 2006; Peters & Welch, 1980).

There is reason to believe, however, that the public does not always get to decide the electoral fortunes of the accused. The anecdote related above regarding former Representative Anthony Weiner provides us with evidence that during sex scandals intense media scrutiny compels party leaders to shed the member in question, forcing them to resign their seats (Hernandez, 2011). In other cases, for instance, in Mark Foley’s congressional page sex messaging scandal, Republican leadership also moved quickly, pressuring Foley to resign so that media attention would die away and regular legislative business could resume uninterrupted (Halloran, 2011). Since for-profit media norms and routines may oblige outlets to pay more attention to sexual scandals than to financial scandals, there is also an expectation that sex scandals will result in electoral “defeat” at higher rates than will financial scandals – sex scandals receive such intense coverage, members often have to step aside rather than draw attention from their party’s political agenda. This chapter investigates this possibility using aggregated data, modeling the interactive effects of scandal type and frequency of media coverage on electoral outcomes in the U.S. House of Representatives over a 16-year period.

### **Method**

**Data.** To analyze the above hypotheses, an aggregate dataset was constructed that captured variables associated with members of the U.S. House of Representatives who were



accused of a scandal during January 1, 1996 to November 6, 2012. House members who were accused of a scandal were identified using a variety of sources, including the Congressional Quarterly Almanac, investigative reports listed on the House Ethics Committee website (<http://ethics.house.gov>), and reference texts discussing House members accused of scandal (Herrick, 2003; Long, 2007; Marion, 2010; Roberts, 2001; Thompson, 1995). One problem with relying on these sources is that they tend to exclude non-criminal scandal or scandals that the opposition party decides not to pursue. For example, in the case of Anthony Weiner, an ethics committee investigation was called for by House Republicans, but was never pursued after Weiner resigned from office. Since more recent cases like Weiner's may not be listed in any of these sources, each source was cross-referenced with Wikipedia's ongoing, crowd-sourced "list of federal political sex scandals in the United States." Combined, these sources resulted in an inclusive list of members accused of scandal from 1996 to 2012 (Appendix C).

Members were only included in the analyses if they met two criteria: (1) the member was investigated by the House Ethics Committee or violated a criminal law, or (2) received media coverage regarding an act of financial or sexual misconduct. Both criteria were necessary. For a scandal to be considered as such, the press must reveal the scandal while the representative is still in office (Marion, 2010, p. 11; Thompson, 2000). For instance, it is known that President John F. Kennedy had extramarital affairs while in office. Yet the press chose not to cover these events while Kennedy was president, eliminating the possibility that Kennedy's power would be delegitimized by scandal while he retained his position (Marion, 2010, p. 11). Therefore, while we may think of the Kennedy affairs as "scandals," they would not meet the criteria for inclusion here since Kennedy's power was not compromised by press coverage and public reaction. Based on these criteria,  $n = 55$  U.S. House scandals were used in the analysis.

**Measures. Controls.** Rottinghaus's (2014) research of Executive scandals, and Herrick (2000) and Basinger's (2013) analyses of congressional scandals were used as frameworks. First, this study collected and aggregated demographic and behavioral data on each U.S. House member to use as controls in the subsequent procedures (Table 4). First, data were collected on the representative's number of years in Congress, or tenure, at the time the scandal occurred. Tenure factors into the likelihood a House member will resign or retire his post (Hibbing, 1982). Members who have represented their districts for long periods of time may be better able to weather scandal accusations than new members who have fewer resources in their home districts.

Table 4.  
Descriptive Statistics for Electoral Analysis

	<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>	<u>Range</u>
<b>Controls</b>			
Tenure	15.86	9.99	1 to 39 years
Leader	40.00%	---	0 = not a leader, 1 = leader
Republican	56.00%	---	0 = Democrat, 1 = Republican
Vote Share	68.12%	13.65	43.00 to 100.00% in previous election
<b>IVs</b>			
Financial Scandal	70.00%	---	0 = sexual scandal, 1 = financial scandal
Media Coverage	1.63	1.29	0 to 5.00 (log)
<b>DV</b>			
Electoral Outcome	0.62	0.83	0 = win reelection, 1 = lose reelection, 2 = resign

Note: n = 51.

Two representatives ran unopposed, garnering a vote share of 100.00% in the pre-scandal election. Following Herrick (2000), the study used Washington Post stories as a proxy for national media attention. Media coverage was logged to account for significant skew ( $p < .001$ ) that resulted from many scandals garnering very few stories and some scandals engendering high amounts of coverage. Subsequent modeling was checked using the unlogged media variable.

Data were also collected on whether the member held a leadership position in the House at the time the scandal was revealed. A leader was defined as a House member who held the rank

of speaker, majority or minority leaders and whips, or committee chairs (Herrick, 2000).

Members in these positions of leadership, who possess institutional power, might be more insulated from the effects of scandal. Leaders might also receive more media attention because they hold more power in the chamber. Since party control of the House changes from time to time, it is also important to consider a member's party affiliation. The Republican variable therefore accounts, in part, for potential differences in formal sanctions for members of in-group and rival parties. The analysis also controlled for vote share in the election prior to the scandal accusations. The vote share variable was continuous, and used a measure of electoral security and competition within the member's district. House members who had a high vote share in the election prior to a scandal accusation are assumed to have a higher degree of electoral security.

**Independent Variables.** Media coverage was measured by the frequency of Washington Post stories that mentioned a scandal. This measure acts as a proxy for national media attention and is based on Herrick's (2000) study of media effects on post-scandal electoral outcomes. Importantly, story mentions were only measured from the day a scandal was first reported, until the day the member resigned, or until the day of the next election. This procedure was used to eliminate any irrelevant stories prior to the scandal event, and to eliminate scandal coverage that occurred after resignation or Election Day and had no effect on the member's electoral fortunes.

The LexisNexis Academic database was used to collect data. Media stories were found by searching key terms associated with a scandal (e.g., "Anthony Weiner" "sex" "scandal"). For a news story to be included in the analysis, the story had to mention the representative by name, and make a direct reference to the scandal. In each case, key terms related to the scandal varied and when scandals overlapped, coding for inclusion became problematic. Therefore each article was analyzed to make ensure it contained a mention of both the scandal and the member's name.

The second independent variable was type of scandal – financial or sexual. Scandals vary widely in context, but can be delineated as primarily consisting of financial or sexual misconduct (Thompson, 2000). Each scandal included in the analysis was coded as either “financial” (e.g., bribery) or “sexual” (e.g., extramarital affair) in nature and represented in the analysis using a dichotomous dummy variable. Since this study’s hypotheses make specific predictions about sex scandals, sex scandals were coded high and financial scandals were used as the reference group. By interacting the scandal type dummy variable with the media coverage variable, it was possible to assess the frequency of media stories devoted to financial and sexual scandals.

**Dependent Variable.** A trichotomous dependent variable assessed each representative’s electoral outcome in the wake of scandal. This variable measured whether the House member won reelection after being accused of a scandal, whether they ran for reelection and lost, or whether they resigned after the accusations were made public. Winning reelection was coded low and used as the reference group. Thus, the analysis compares the effects of media coverage and scandal type on the probability of losing reelection or resigning to winning reelection. Importantly, scandals may influence whether a congressman decides to strategically retire or resign from office (Groseclose & Krehbiel, 1994; Wilkins, 2012) and this analysis accounts for this possibility by making resignation a unique outcome on the dependent variable.

## **Results**

**Media Coverage of U.S. House Scandals.** The study first used a series of one-sample t-tests to explore the impact of scandal type – financial or sexual – on frequency of scandal news coverage. To show changes in scandal coverage over time, scandals were divided into three periods for this analysis, corresponding to the presidential administrations of Bill Clinton (1996-2000), George W. Bush (2001-2008), and Barack Obama (2009-2012) (see Figure 9).

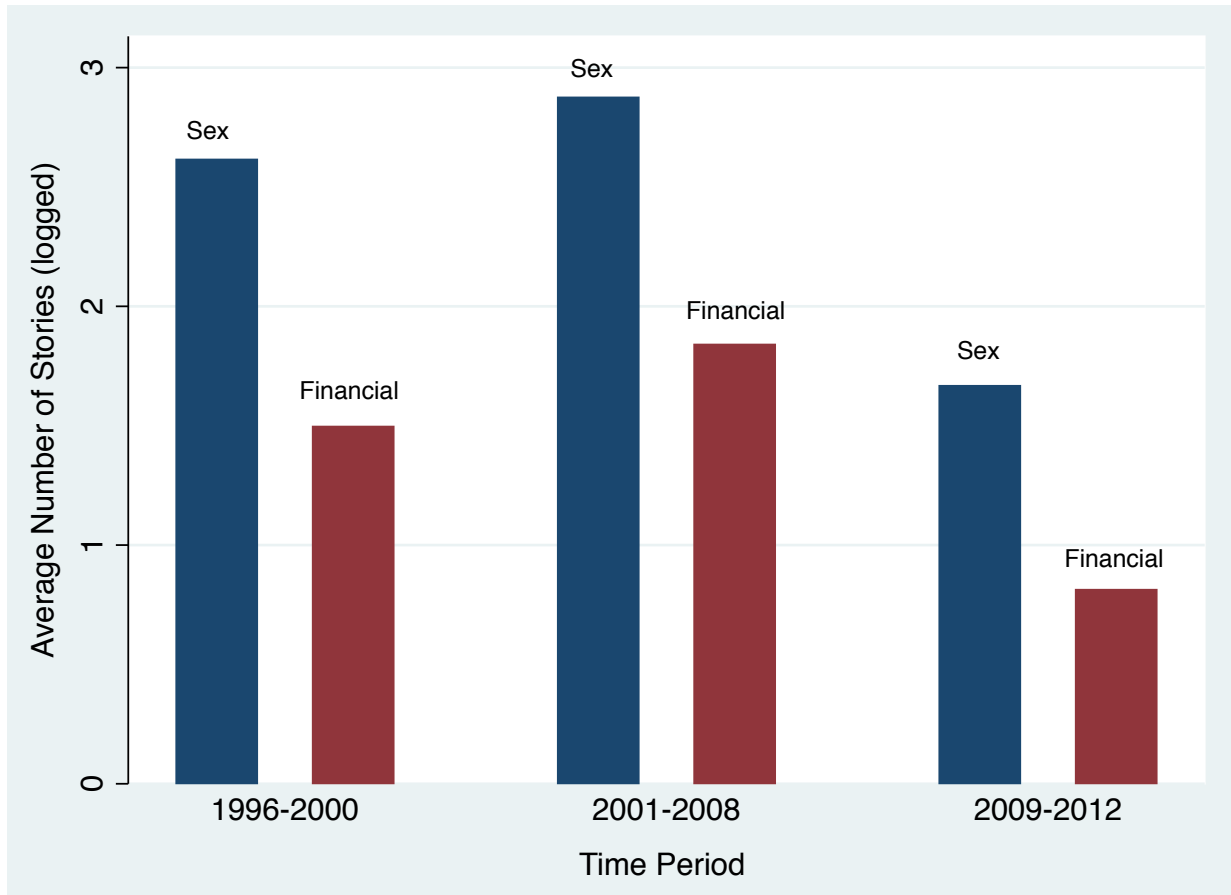


Figure 9.  
Average Number of Washington Post Stories By Scandal Type and Time Period

Note:  $n = 51$ . The Y-axis represents the average number of Washington Post news stories covering U.S. House members accused of financial and sexual scandals from 1996 to 2000 ( $n = 6$ ), 2001 to 2008 ( $n = 21$ ), and 2009 to 2012 ( $n = 23$ ). These values were logged to reduce skew.

In the three time periods analyzed, the average number of Washington Post stories mentioning a House sex scandal  $\bar{X}_S$  was greater than the average number of stories mentioning House financial scandals  $\bar{X}_F$ . Using a one-tailed test ( $\bar{X}_S - \bar{X}_F$ ), these differences were significant during the Clinton period  $t(6) = 2.24, p < .05$ , the Bush period  $t(21) = 1.58, p < .10$ , and the Obama period from 2009 to 2012  $t(23) = 1.89, p < .05$ . Notably, financial scandals involving former lobbyist Jack Abramoff occurred during the Bush period, temporarily increasing the average number of stories about House financial scandals. Yet this appears to be an exception to

the rule of coverage. Sex scandals garnered more overall coverage than did financial scandals, providing additional support for H1, which predicted sex scandals will receive more coverage.

**Media Coverage and Electoral Outcomes.** Considering the unordered, trichotomous nature of the dependent variable, the predictive analysis used a multinomial logistic regression procedure (Long & Freese, 2006). This type of multivariate regression can measure the effect of each independent variable on the probability of being coded in one of the categories of the dependent variable, in this case, as winning reelection, losing reelection or resigning.

Additionally, standard errors were clustered by year to account for changes to the media and political environment that may have occurred during the period analyzed. Throughout the 1990s there was little coverage of political scandal compared to substantive policy concerns (Morris & Clawson, 2005). But the mass media and political environments have evolved since the 1990s (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008). During the 16 years studied, control of Congress and the Executive branch changed hands several times, the media underwent economic setbacks, and partisan niche audiences were increasingly driving news content (Stroud, 2011), which could result in partisan differences in scandal news coverage (Puglisi & Snyder, 2011). The press has also become more active in seeking out and reporting political scandals over the past three to four decades (Entman, 2013; Lichter & Amundson, 1994; Marion, 2010), and the Internet may only fuel coverage as provocative scandals like that of former New York Representative Anthony Weiner go viral on the Web. There is also unlimited space for stories on the Web, and Web stories may be more likely to cater to “soft” scandal news (Hamilton, 2004).

As shown in Table 4, there was an inconsistent and negligible impact of the control variables on electoral outcomes after scandal accusations have been made. Only three variables – tenure, leadership, and vote share – predicted electoral outcomes following scandal accusations.

In the case of tenure, it appears that members who were in the House longer were less likely to lose ( $b = -0.07$ ,  $SE = 0.02$ ,  $p < .01$ ) or resign ( $b = -0.19$ ,  $SE = 0.11$ ,  $p < .10$ ) following scandal accusations. Leaders were less likely to lose reelection following a scandal than non-leaders ( $b = -1.09$ ,  $SE = 0.53$ ,  $p < .05$ ), although leadership had no effect on resignations. Similarly, representatives with high vote share in the election prior to scandal were more likely to be reelected after being accused of misconduct ( $b = -0.10$ ,  $SE = 0.04$ ,  $p < .01$ ). The same effect of vote share did not emerge for resignations, suggesting that popularity within a member's district was not a key consideration in deciding whether to resign following scandal.

There was a direct effect of scandal type ( $b = -3.62$ ,  $SE = 1.38$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and frequency of press coverage ( $b = 1.75$ ,  $SE = 0.52$ ,  $p < .001$ ) on the probability of resigning. Specifically, financial scandals were less likely than sex scandals to result in resignation. More frequent media coverage also increased the likelihood of resignation. The analysis therefore shows support for H9B, which predicted that frequent media coverage would result in resignations from office.

However, the analysis does not support H9A, which predicted media coverage would result in an increased likelihood of defeat. There was an insignificant direct effect of media exposure on losing reelection. There was also no significant difference between financial and sexual scandals in terms of the probability of losing reelection.

**Interaction Between Scandal Type and Press Coverage.** H10 predicted an interactive relationship between scandal type, financial or sexual in nature, and frequency of press coverage about the scandal. To explore this possibility, the two variables were interacted in the multinomial logit model. As shown in Table 5, both interaction terms were significant predictors of electoral outcomes. Specifically, there was a significant interactive effect on losing reelection ( $b = -1.01$ ,  $SE = 0.48$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and resigning ( $b = 1.12$ ,  $SE = 0.43$ ,  $p < .05$ ) compared to winning

reelection. To better understand these effects, predicted probabilities were generated from the model in Table 5 and are plotted in Figure 10.

Table 5.  
Multinomial Regression Predicting Post-Scandal Electoral Outcomes

	<b>Lose Reelection (vs. Win Reelection)</b>		<b>Resign (vs. Win Reelection)</b>	
	b (SE)	b (SE)	b (SE)	b (SE)
<b><u>Controls</u></b>				
Tenure	<b>-0.09**</b> (0.03)	<b>-0.07**</b> (0.02)	<b>-0.12*</b> (0.06)	<b>-0.19†</b> (0.11)
Leader	-0.85 (0.68)	<b>-1.09*</b> (0.53)	0.66 (1.01)	1.14 (1.43)
Republican	0.40 (0.57)	-0.15 (0.54)	0.29 (1.22)	0.55 (1.40)
Vote Share	<b>-0.08*</b> (0.04)	<b>-0.10**</b> (0.04)	-0.05 (0.06)	-0.02 (0.06)
<b><u>IVs</u></b>				
Financial Scandal	-0.43 (0.92)	-0.48 (1.01)	-1.82 (1.29)	<b>-3.62**</b> (1.38)
Media Exposure	0.41 (0.39)	-0.19 (0.46)	<b>1.05*</b> (0.49)	<b>1.75**</b> (0.52)
<b><u>Interaction</u></b>				
Scandal X Media	---	<b>-1.01*</b> (0.48)	---	<b>1.12*</b> (0.43)
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	34.29%	43.19%	34.29%	43.19%
Log Likelihood	-31.16***	-26.94***	-31.16***	-26.94***
N	51	51	51	51
PRE	4.80%	9.40%	4.80%	9.40%

Note: \*\*\*p<.001, \*\*p<.01, \*p<.05, †p<.10.

Standard errors are clustered by year, to mitigate temporal effects on electoral outcomes. I ran alternative models using CNN transcript mentions of scandal, finding substantively similar results (see Appendix D). For model parsimony, I included only the Washington Post media indicator. A logistic regression predicting post-scandal wins and losses created highly similar results.



The upper left-hand panel of Figure 10 shows the probability of winning reelection for members accused of a financial scandal is high (Probability of winning = 0.78) and decreases with media coverage until reaching its nadir at the high end of press coverage (Probability of winning = 0.50). The same effect occurs with sex scandals, but to a greater extent.

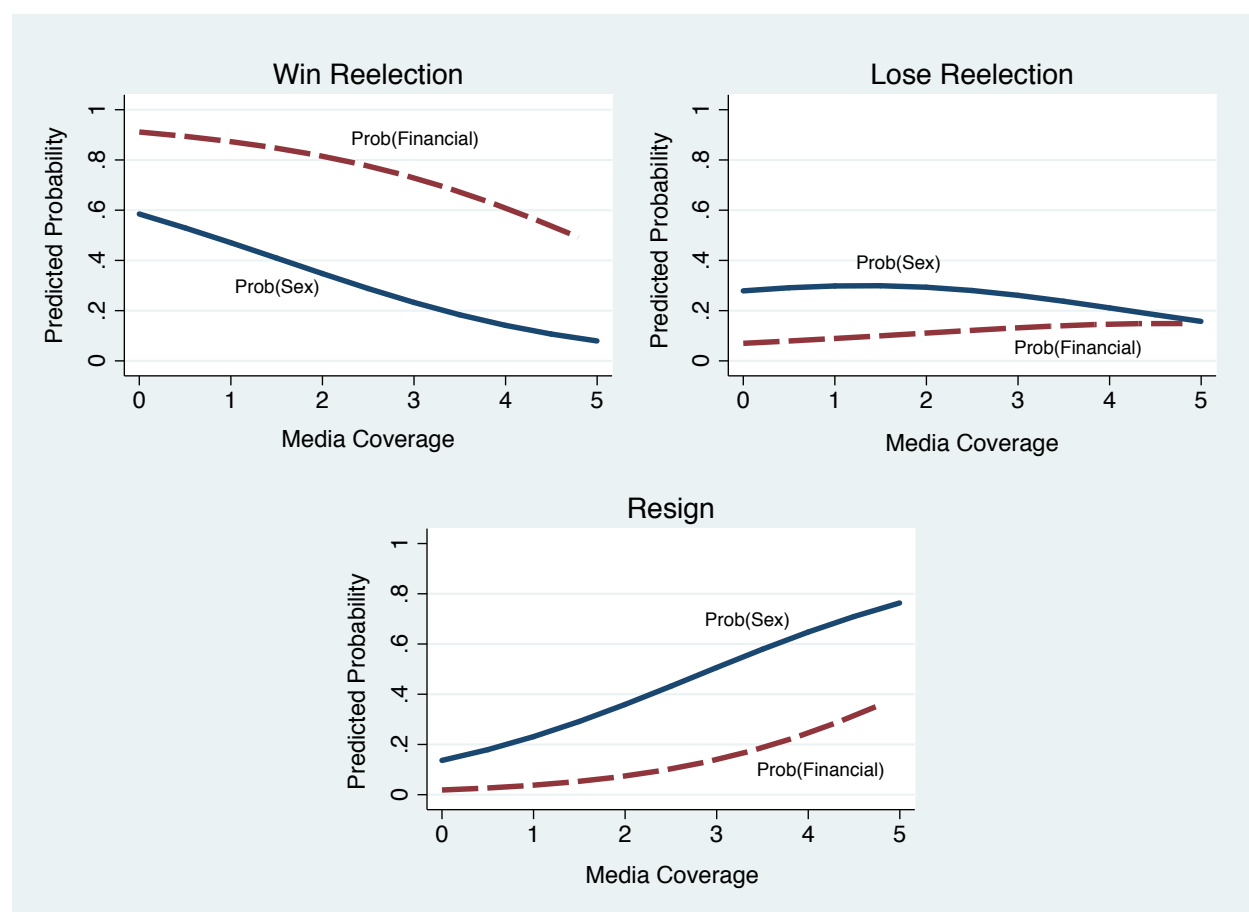


Figure 10.  
Interactive Effect of Scandal Type and Media Coverage on Electoral Outcomes

Note: The heavy blue line represents probabilities that U.S. House members accused of a sex scandal were coded “win reelection,” “lose reelection” or “resign” on the electoral outcome variable, by frequency of media coverage. The dashed red line represents probabilities that U.S. House members accused of a financial scandal were coded “win reelection,” lose reelection” or “resign” on the electoral outcome variable, by frequency of media coverage. These probabilities are generated from Table 5, holding all other variables in the model constant at their mean.

The probability a member accused of sex scandal will win reelection at the lowest level of media coverage is 0.59. The probability that a representative accused of a sex scandal will win reelection at the highest level of media coverage is approximately 0.10.

As shown in the upper right-hand panel of Figure 10 representatives are about equally likely to lose reelection at every level of media coverage. In terms of resignations, coverage of sex scandals led to higher rates of resignation for sex scandals than financial scandals, as indicated by the steeper slope in the bottom panel of Figure 10. As media intensity increases, the probability that a member of the U.S. House accused of a sex scandal will resign increases rapidly, approaching a probability of 0.80 at the highest levels of media attention. The same trend holds for financial scandals, but to a far lesser extent. In the case of financial scandals, high media coverage resulted in a probability of resigning of approximately 0.38.

These results show partial support for H10, which predicted that sex scandals would garner more press coverage than financial scandals, in turn relating to a higher number of early resignations from office. High doses of financial scandal press coverage relate to increases in the probability a member of the U.S. House will resign office. However, the effect of press coverage on post-scandal resignations is more pronounced when the scandal involves some type of sexual misconduct. The overall pattern shows that representatives accused of financial misconduct are more likely to retain their seats, no matter the amount of press attention, whereas media exert powerful effects on whether an official accused of sexual misconduct “survives” electorally.

### **Discussion**

This chapter demonstrates that, across three time periods corresponding to the Clinton (1996-2000), Bush (2001-2008) and Obama (2009-2012) administrations, U.S. House members accused of a sex scandal received more frequent media attention than did representatives accused

of a financial scandal. During the Bush years (2001-2008), the difference in the average frequency of press mentions was less pronounced, possibly due to widespread financial corruption associated with former lobbyist Jack Abramoff. Yet the trend across all three time periods was for sex scandals to receive more frequent coverage than financial scandals (H1).

Press attention to official misconduct, in turn, has detrimental effects on electoral prospects of the accused members (H9A and H9B). Indeed, as media coverage of scandal escalates, the probability that a representative accused of a sex scandal will resign approaches 1.0. Meanwhile representatives accused of a financial scandal not only do not resign, they often run for and win reelection. Contrary to extant experimental evidence (Doherty et al., 2011), citizens do not appear to make harsh electoral evaluations about representatives accused of financial misconduct. Possibly, this finding is related to the notion that Americans dislike Congress as a whole, but like their own congressman (Gallup, 2013). Popular representatives who offer bribes in Washington may add to widespread public distrust of Congress, but may add to the political cache of the individual congressman. That is, Americans may not like the idea of congressmen stealing, but when their congressman steals, it may be perceived as acceptable.

What is perhaps most striking about the effect of media coverage on scandal is that citizens rarely receive the opportunity to judge officials accused of sexual misconduct at the ballot box, since these officials almost all resign as media coverage – and party pressure – increases (H10). As Hernandez's (2011) article suggests, sex scandals like Anthony Weiner's create a media attention "problem" for the party. Political capital is a finite resource, and it appears that party leadership is not willing to burn that capital by supporting likeminded representatives accused of salacious scandals that distract from party goals. Based on these findings, it may "safer" for a representative to steal than score; electoral security is jeopardized

most when an official is accused of sexual mischief, creating media attention that derails party goals, and that must be remedied by the removal of the problematic official.

Importantly, this study considered the possibility that Washington Post coverage may not accurately reflect national attention to different types of scandal, or to individual scandals (but see Herrick, 2000). Substituting mentions of scandals in CNN transcripts, this study found substantively similar results, suggesting that using Washington Post stories was not a limitation (see Appendix D). This chapter does not claim that media coverage of political scandal is uniform across all national media outlets, only that a trend appears to be that more coverage is allotted to sexual transgressions and that this coverage tends to lead to high rates of resignations from public office. It is plausible that there are partisan differences in scandal coverage (Puglisi & Snyder, 2011; Stroud, 2011) that could result in differing electoral outcomes, a possibility that deserves further scholarly attention. Additionally, for parsimony, this study only analyzed scandals affecting members of the U.S. House of Representatives. It is conceivable that U.S. Senators accused of a scandal receive differing patterns of media attention.

One implication of this study is that the economic rewards that come with increased press attention to congressional sex scandals do not always mesh with democratic norms. By inflating audience attention with entertaining scandal narratives and shoring up their profit margins, it appears that the national media may inadvertently focus more public and elite attention on a type of congressional scandal that is arguably the lesser of two evils (Entman, 2012). The press, placed in this framework, holds great power over the parties, and the public's ability to fulfill their democratic duty through popular election of representatives. The media cannot defeat an official accused of a sex scandal by literally casting a vote in the next election, but the media can go far in getting the congressman's name removed from the ballot altogether.

## **CHAPTER 5. CONCLUSION**

### **Introduction**

The press has been criticized for being unable or unwilling to fulfill its role as a conduit for accurate, engaging and useful political information. It has been argued that the press focuses too much on political gamesmanship and electoral strategy, contributing little to the substantive discussion of policy and public affairs (Cappella & Jamieson, 1996; Fallows, 1997). It has been said that journalists do not adjudicate competing partisan claims, leaving the audience in the unlucky position of deciding which political claims are factual and which are bogus (Pingree, 2011). Institutional routines that demand journalists pay attention to official statements result in the government “wagging the dog,” sending journalists on wild goose chases for the latest tidbit of newsworthy information and leaving audiences with fragmented views of political and social reality (Iyengar & Kinder, 2010). The press provides much-needed political information to the electorate, but not nearly to the degree it could, or should (Patterson, 2013).

Given the many criticisms hurled at the press, and the many empirical studies that have confirmed the basis of these criticisms, it seems unlikely that the press does an outstanding, or even an adequate job of covering political scandal. Indeed, the evidence presented in this study suggest that the press is not “properly calibrated,” in Entman’s (2012) terminology, to the severity or implications of political scandals affecting the Executive, Legislative and Judicial branches of federal government, and scandals involving state governors. Rather than provide intense scrutiny to profound forms of criminal political corruption that involve financial scheming, the national media give as much, and often more attention to the trivial but entertaining details of our political officials’ sex lives. Extramarital affairs that were once considered private issues off limits to journalists are now thought to be fair game (Marion, 2010).

Accusations of deviant sexual activity are now blown up into Watergate-level scandals that generate wall-to-wall coverage until the official's party forces him to resign.

Ironically, resignations that follow sex scandal publicity are likely premature. Officials accused of sex scandals are not regarded as pariahs by ordinary citizens; on the other hand, the public seems to evaluate these officials more positively than officials accused of extortion, bribery, tax evasion and other forms of financial misconduct. The manner in which the public interprets the severity of political scandals, in other words, is entirely "rational" and in direct opposition to the how the press reports them. Driven by habitual attention to official statements, and by economic incentives to create entertaining and understandable narratives, the press emphasizes the titillating, salacious, sensational but ultimately inconsequential aspects of political sex lives. The public, while interested, do not often find these matters worthy of removing an official from office, especially if the official is otherwise popular and effective. Yet the overwhelming publicity given to sex scandals forces the hand of party leadership, who must put party image and the ability to leverage public opinion ahead of any one party member's career; the party forces the official to resign, rather than allow him to remain a distraction.

The press, it seems, wields incredible power to unseat officials accused of sexual misconduct. Journalists could elect to ignore or downplay partisan allegations of sexual dalliance, and focus more intensely on real crimes committed by public officials who citizens have entrusted to their formal representatives. Instead, by focusing on sex scandals, the press allows partisan officials to use these events as political hand grenades, derailing the opposition's ability to create policy, direct public opinion, and improve its image. Sex scandals are like jokers in the card "game" of politics. They are wild and wooly but understandable narratives that describe events as old as human sexuality itself. They can result in a partisan backfire, damaging the

accusers as much or more than the accused (Zaller, 1998). However, sex scandals represent low-hanging fruit for news media with dwindling budgets and personnel. They are provocative, dramatic and understandable narratives that pique audience interest. And thus, sex scandals fit snugly within the economic incentives and institutional motivations of the national press.

If there were any one area of politics that the press should cover well it is the area of scandal. Participatory democracy assumes an active and engaged citizenry who can identify and judge corrupt leaders, removing them by way of the ballot (Clawson & Oxley, 2012). The press could facilitate this process by showing the way for citizens to punish truly criminal leaders, officials who have violated not only society's sense of personal morality, but what is considered appropriate behavior by democratically elected representatives. Certainly, sex scandals represent transgressions of social mores regulating what is considered "correct" or "deviant sexual behavior. Sex scandals may involve illegal behavior or the breaking of campaign promises about serving as a "moral leader" or "restoring moral leadership" to Washington. The majority of political sex scandals, however, do not break these boundaries. They are private affairs, and relatively harmless when compared side by side with official extortion and bribery. To argue that former New York Representative Anthony Weiner's "sexting" scandal is on the level of Watergate, or of the Jack Abramoff Indian casino scandal is a wasted exercise. Such scandals are qualitatively different, with the latter scandals representing wider breaches of democratic, ethical and legal norms than events involving the aberrant sexual behavior of Anthony Weiner.

Yet the frequency with which the press covers financial and sexual misconduct indicates that scandal typology is not a major consideration when deciding which scandals to report. This study does not claim that all journalists everywhere ignore such a consideration. Nonetheless, the aggregate data presented in this study do not lie. The data speak volumes about what the press

and the public view to be an important issues, and the divergences between these two viewpoints. Below, the major findings of this study are summarized. The study's implications for citizens, parties, and national news media are addressed. This chapter also sets forth a number of realistic – and radical – recommendations for generating “properly calibrated” scandal coverage. Many of these recommendations may seem impractical in the short term. In the long-term, changes to the news media may be necessary to engage citizens, reduce or eliminate corruption among government officials, and maintain the health and functionality of American democracy.

### **Summary of Findings**

**Chapter 1.** The purpose of this study was to investigate patterns of scandal news coverage, paying careful attention to how the press handles scandal typology. Chapter 1 outlined several overarching questions that guided this study's empirical analyses. First, does the national news media pay more attention, on average, to egregious political scandals involving financial misconduct than it does scandals involving violations of society's sexual mores? What effects do patterns of media attention have on the electoral fortunes of accused officials? Finally, how do citizens process scandal news and evaluate officials accused of wrongdoing?

**Chapter 2.** The first step in investigating these questions was establishing that the press indeed covers different types of scandal – the financial and sexual varieties – in different ways. Using five and a half years of aggregated Pew News Coverage Index (NCI) data, Chapter 2 demonstrated that the press provides more frequent coverage to sex scandals, on average, than it provides financial scandals. Analyzing over 4,000 news stories and 24 scandal scenarios affecting officials from the Executive, Legislative and Judicial branches of the federal government and scandals involving state governors, this chapter showed that the press focuses its energies on cases of sexual scandal. Financial scandals like that of former Illinois Governor Rod



Blagojevich can generate intense media scrutiny, but these are exceptions, not the rule. The rule is for relatively trivial sex scandals to receive more frequent press coverage, on average.

Frequency of scandal coverage is regulated by the media format. Since cable television and online news have large “newsholes,” must compete directly with pure forms of entertainment programming delivered via the same medium (Fallows, 1997), and cater to “soft news” audiences (Hamilton, 2004), more scandal stories appear on cable and the Internet compared to print newspapers. In the war to grab and maintain audience attention, television and Internet news has attempted to make its programming more entertaining (Fallows, 1997). The same could be said of print newspapers, but not to the same degree. This study shows that print newspapers downplay all types of scandal news, while cable and the Internet thrive on it.

The results of Chapter 2 show that there is one factor that may mitigate the frequency of scandal coverage. If an official retires within two weeks of scandal allegations, it appears that scandal coverage is reduced. A logical explanation for this finding may be that the opposition party no longer has cause to pursue allegations via official statements; the opposition party has received exactly what it wanted, with the official resigning and being stripped of his power. Institutional norms motivate journalists to rely on official statements to guide their coverage. Without official statements to point the finger of blame at the official, press coverage wanes.

It was also discovered that liberal- and conservative-leaning cable TV news networks (Morris, 2005; Stroud, 2011) might have their own fragmented, partisan scandal agendas. As predicted, the results suggest that Fox News provides more coverage, on average, to scandals that reflect poorly on Democrats than scandals that portray Republicans in a negative light. Since Fox tends to be more politically conservative than other networks, this result was consistent with previous research on fragmented partisan agendas (Stroud, 2011). Counter to this study’s

hypothesis, liberal-leaning CNN also gave more attention to Democratic scandals than Republican scandals. It is possible that other elements of scandals, in particular, the entertainment value of sex scandals, led to more coverage of Democratic scandals. Since CNN is a for-profit news organization, they may focus heavy attention on any type of scandal, involving Democratic or Republican officials. In other words, partisan considerations may not be the only considerations when determining the frequency of scandal news coverage.

**Chapter 3.** The press may give more credence to sex scandals by giving them more frequent coverage than financial misconduct. Do patterns of scandal coverage match patterns of public evaluations? Using a survey-based experiment administered to an Amazon Mechanical Turk subject pool, this chapter replicated evidence from previous studies showing that the public is relatively unconcerned about allegations of sexual misconduct (Doherty et al., 2011). Rather, the public appears to process scandals rationally. Citizens assign harsher evaluations to officials accused of severe forms of financial misconduct, in this case, an official who used his office to commit fraud. The public punishes financial misconduct; the press punishes sexual misconduct.

There were several factors that regulated how citizens gauged evaluations of accused officials. First and foremost, no scandal had a main effect on evaluations. All officials accused of scandal were evaluated negatively. A key differentiating mechanisms in scandal evaluation was partisan group affiliation (Huddy, 2013). Conservatives protected a scandal-plagued member of the Republican Party, whereas liberals protected an identical likeminded Democratic official. All else equal, human beings are likely to protect members of their group (Tajfel, 1982), including their political group. In the case of scandal, ideology drives patterns of evaluations.

Second, the impact of ideologically motivated moral values on scandal evaluations was assessed. Conservatives tend to rely on the value dimension of sexual and bodily Sanctity /

Degradation when making judgments about social problems or official wrongdoing (Graham et al., 2009; Haidt, 2012). Liberals do not. Instead, liberals make moral evaluations on the basis of the Fairness / Cheating moral value dimension, suggesting that liberals will process scandal information within the context of fairness. The expectation, then, is that liberals will be more critical of financial scandals and conservatives will be more critical of sex scandals. Nevertheless, this chapter did not support hypotheses associated with ideologically driven values and scandal typology. Liberals and conservatives appeared more motivated to judge officials accused of scandal on the basis of partisan affiliation rather than the type of scandal involved.

This chapter also examined the role of political knowledge in moderating the effect of scandal information on official evaluations. Individuals with large stores of political knowledge were hypothesized to process scandal news differently than individuals who don't know much about the political world. Specifically, individuals with high levels of knowledge were hypothesized to either (A) be more able to gauge scandal severity, providing harsher punishments to more severe financial scandals than sex scandals, or (B) be more able to connect prior beliefs with partisan scandal information, providing harsh evaluations to officials accused of both financial and sexual misconduct. Evidence was found supporting the second hypothesis. Even controlling for frequency of church attendance as a proxy for participant religiosity and the participant's level of ideological attachment and concomitant moral values, this chapter found that individuals with high levels of political knowledge judge officials involved in sex scandals more negatively than do individuals with low levels of knowledge. Financial misconduct engenders almost equally negative reactions from low and high knowledge participants. These findings suggest that rather than helping citizens to grasp the ramifications of scandal and dole

out corresponding punishments at the ballot box, political knowledge appears to bias participants to consider the “game” of politics and connect scandal information to prior political beliefs.

**Chapter 4.** Having established that the press pays more attention to the average sex scandal than it does the average financial scandal, Chapter 4 investigates the electoral ramifications of press coverage. Using aggregated data on the U.S. House of Representatives from 1996 to 2012, this chapter explores the impact of scandal typology and press coverage by scandal type on the electoral fortunes of accused members. It found that officials accused of sexual misconduct overwhelmingly resign their office, and resign quickly, rather than generate media coverage that may distract from their party’s agenda or damage their party’s image. Financial scandals, meanwhile, received less press attention, and House members accused of financial misconduct were unlikely to resign. Voters did not often punish financial misconduct by “throwing the bastards out” of office. Yet the likelihood an official accused of financial misconduct losing an election following allegations was higher than the likelihood of losing an election, mainly due to the fact sex scandals result in high rates of resignation.

Popularity within one’s district, as measured by accounting for vote share in the previous election cycle, insulated House members from losing the election following scandal. However, vote share had no effect on resignations, suggesting that public opinion of an official had little effect on his likelihood of resigning or staying in office. Party leaders who were involved in a scandal were also better insulated from electoral defeat, possibly because of their standing in Congress and ability to fundraise for political ads and other messages that could deflect scandal. Again, party leadership status has no effect on resignations following scandal, indicating that standing in the House had no direct effect on whether a scandal resulted in leaving office early.

Using Washington Post stories as a proxy for national media attention, this chapter also found that more press coverage was given to sexual scandals than financial scandals, on average, across a sixteen-year timeframe. This finding builds on the results of Chapter 2. It suggests that the national news media has been focused on political sex scandals at least since 1996. While corruption like that of the Jack Abramoff scandal isn't ignored, such scandals are often not the focus of press coverage. Moreover, patterns of press coverage have real-world electoral outcomes. Intense media scrutiny in the wake of sex scandals forces party leadership to make officials resign their positions, as was the case with Anthony Weiner (Hernandez, 2011), Mark Foley (Halloran, 2011), Gary Condit (Standora, 2001), and Eric Massa (Benjamin & McAuliff, 2010). Media scrutiny of financial malfeasance also leads to resignations from office, but it is much more likely that officials accused of financial wrongdoing win reelection.

### **Implications**

This dissertation contributes to the literature by illuminating the complex interplay of communication and decision-making transpiring in scandal scenarios. Rather than taking an “all scandals are created equal” approach, this study shows that different types of scandals – of the sexual and financial variety – have different effects on press coverage and public interpretations. While the press often pursues accusations of sexual misconduct, the public focuses on financial misbehavior. And since the press downplays official financial misconduct relative to sexual dalliances, the public has a reduced likelihood of receiving information that would allow them to make critical decisions about elected officials accused of financial malfeasance. Meanwhile, the media firestorm following a sex scandal is so relatively intense that officials resign quickly in order to avoid unwanted publicity. In essence, this study contributes the literature by showing

that the media's scandal agenda is out of sync with the public's, making it electorally safer for officials to steal from their own constituents than to have sex with their secretary.

The results of this study have implications for democratic citizenship, political parties, and the press. It is important to address, however, an important limitation in the argument put forth in this study: not everyone conceptualizes the national press as a “political institution” or an “intermediary” “Fourth Branch” of American government designed to act as another set of actors in the political sphere (Cook, 1996; 2005; Schudson, 1981; 2002; 2011). Crucially, the press may also be conceptualized as economic organizations, “businesses” that sell news “products” and are beholden not to citizens but to their own “customers” (Hamilton, 2004). If we accept that the national media are simply business organizations out to make a buck, then very little of the preceding argument matters since the press cannot be held responsible for actions that shore up its financial bottom line at the expense of an under- or ill-informed citizenry.

Compelling theoretical arguments have been made concerning the role of the press as a democratic institution (see especially, Cook, 1996; 2005; Schudson, 1981; 2002; 2011) and the failure of that institution to address political scandals and lesser controversies (Entman, 2012). Yet these arguments, influential as they may be, are not without criticism. Equally persuasive arguments have been offered, mainly by members of the journalism community, that the press is merely an organization in the business of selling information to consumers (see Fallows, 1997; McChesney, 2004; Schudson, 2011). When cries of partisan bias or objections about the perceived failures of the press to inform the citizenry are made, the response from the journalism community is that news is a business, one that depends on audience interest for financial sustainability. Media professionals argue that their business will go under if the news doesn't continually alter its format and patterns of coverage to compete for audience attention with “soft

news” shows like Comedy Central’s Daily Show with Jon Stewart, or with pure entertainment such as professional football games or HBO dramas. While print newspapers may maintain a loyal base of “hard news” readers, market competition on cable and the Internet keeps news production moving at a breakneck pace, with the more sensational and titillating, but not necessarily more substantial topics, making headlines. A “scandal-minded” (Fallows, 1997, p. 3) press with an eye on ratings rather than informing the electorate makes for entertaining news programming. If the press is merely a conglomeration of businesses that convey political information to the public, then an entertaining press is sufficient and acceptable.

A second limitation of this study rests in another normative assumption: that the average sexual scandal is not worthy of the volume of coverage it receives. An argument could be made that sex scandals are not only highly relevant to moralizing politicians who make promises to be ethical leaders, but to anyone holding high public office. Additionally, it could be suggested that a sex scandal may reveal something more sinister about an official’s character, particularly if the official makes efforts to deny accusations of actual sexual misconduct. Character traits matter to voters, and if a sexual scandal reveals a defect in an official’s character, it may therefore be important for journalists to pursue accusations of sexual misconduct (Entman, 2012, p. 49).

Yet this argument relies on its own set of assumptions. First and foremost, it makes a slippery slope assumption that the official’s action in the private realm (e.g., an extramarital affair) has a direct influence on ethical decision making in general or on policy decisions in particular (e.g., voting on a gender equality bill). This is a problematic leap, since the assumption is that other, competing forces like the official’s ideology or external party influence do not also shape decisions about, for instance, whether to vote on a bill protecting equal pay for men and women. The inverse of this relationship also illustrates a problem with the argument. Consider a

politician who is a highly ethical individual and who never cheats on his or her spouse, but who consistently votes on bills that members of the public deem unethical – for example, pro-abortion or pro-death penalty bills. In such cases, the politician’s private and public behavior is distinct and compartmentalized in an inverse fashion, with the ethical private behavior seemingly having nothing to do with the “unethical” policymaking behavior. Second, the argument that sex scandals may reveal something important about an official’s character commits a moralistic fallacy in that it assumes that since philandering is deemed wrong by the society we live in, it must therefore be absolutely wrong. Social mores governing sexual deviance have changed drastically throughout history. In ancient Greece, senators could legally own slaves and concubines. Just fifty years ago, it was illegal and “immoral” in many U.S. states for an interracial couple to marry. As times change, social constructions of proper and deviant sexual behavior change. What may be deemed improper sexual behavior by an elected official today may have no bearing on what is considered improper ten, twenty or fifty years from now.

Recognizing the caveat that the implications of this study depend on how one conceptualizes the media’s role in democracy – as a political institution or business – and on whether one deems a sex scandal as revelatory of defect in an official’s character or judgment, this study proceeds by outlining broad consequences for citizens, parties, and the press.

**Citizens.** Democracy functions through the popular election of leaders who represent the public will (Clawson & Oxley, 2012). For democracy to function properly, citizens must have the necessary information to elect leaders who best represent their interests. No matter how one conceptualizes the news media’s role in democracy, the press has assumed the task of delivering political information to citizens. And if the news media does its job poorly, if it gives credence to political minutia while overlooking corruption, then citizens may be unable to fulfill their duties.



All news media are driven by institutional habits that create a fragmented and episodic image of political reality, and that leave citizens with a distorted view of the political world (Kinder & Iyengar, 2010). When news media play partisan games, audiences are routinely left with false or underdeveloped perceptions of politics, including which political issues should be considered “most important” to address (Morris, 2005; Stroud, 2011). Likewise, by giving credence to the sexual liaisons of elected officials through frequent coverage, the press may create the illusion that citizens should care more about what goes on in their representative’s bedroom than about the shady transactions their representative is making in his office.

In fact, citizens who possess high levels of political knowledge may be especially susceptible to this kind of perception. Politically sophisticated individuals may be biased processors of scandal information, having the framework necessary to connect news about trivial sexual affairs to the “game” of partisan politics. Knowledgeable citizens are typically more tolerant of the rights of minority political groups (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996), have more consistent and well-defined policy attitudes, and are better able to assign credit or blame to the responsible political officials (Gomez & Wilson, 2001; Sturgis & Smith, 2010). However, knowledgeable individuals are also better able to connect their pre-existing store of political knowledge with news media cues and frames, siding with even weak arguments if they are in favor of their party or ideological persuasion (Chong & Druckman, 2007a; 2007b; Druckman et al., 2013). Evidently individuals with high levels of knowledge are also more susceptible to news about sex scandals. If the news media harps on a sex scandal, it appears to have a stronger, negative effect on evaluations provided by politically sophisticated citizens. Financial scandals, while receiving far less media attention, are viewed as more damaging by citizens at all levels of sophistication.

**Political Parties.** Party objectives are often strategic, with a primary goal being for party image to be constantly improved or at least maintained. Image is power in the world of politics, at least symbolic power. When scandal accusations are made about a political official, group objectives appear to be prioritized above the career objective's of an individual party member. Scandals that generate intense publicity may reflect poorly on party image, potentially damaging reputation and weakening party trust (Marion, 2010; Thompson, 2000). Nevertheless, it may be possible for an official accused of a sensational scandal, even a sex scandal, to weather the media firestorm and retain their office without simultaneously sacrificing the party's image or having public attention shift from the party's policy agenda to the scandalous activities of its members.

In the past, political parties appear to force official resignations to reduce scandal publicity and put party business on track. One assumption underlying this strategy is that publicity will remain constant or increase as time progresses. Indeed, as opposition party officials release statements regarding the scandal, or new information is leaked to journalists, it is possible that even trivial scandals will remain in the public eye. And yet institutional routines and economic incentives dictate that the press cannot focus too intently on any one scandal (Entman, 2012). Journalists are in constant search of the new, the timely, and the entertaining. While provocative scandals may pique initial interest and generate intense media scrutiny, the press is motivated to keep stories fresh. At some point, the press must move on.

The implication is that political parties should not be so quick to force the hand of officials accused of trivial scandals. Former Representative Anthony Weiner provides a good case in point. Weiner was widely considered a rising force in the Democratic Party. He had earned the trust of his constituents and maintained the reputation of an official who would confront members of the Republican opposition in the House. Following his "sexting" scandal

and the accompanying publicity, Democratic officials forced Weiner to resign (Hernandez, 2011). It may have seemed to party officials, at the time, that the wall-to-wall media coverage would never end. However, the press cannot and does not focus on events for inordinate periods of time. As national and world events occurred, as the media agenda became more “congested” with more pressing issues, it is unlikely that Weiner’s sexual escapades would have remained in the headlines (Boydston, 2013). In other words, the Democratic Party might have retained Weiner had they not acted on the increasing publicity. How could this have been accomplished?

One strategy may involve impression managing the scandal coverage. Publicly, parties could place pressure on a likeminded official to resign. This gives the impression that the party is concerned with the misbehavior of one of their members and is willing to penalize the official. Behind closed doors, however, the party could draw ranks and provide support for the accused rather than forfeiting the official’s office. From the official’s perspective, it is never wise to admit to engaging in scandalous activities (Sigal et al., 1988). Denials of misconduct are more persuasive and reduce damage to the official’s reputation. Yet evidence of official wrongdoing, for instance photographic evidence of sexual misbehavior, will motivate admission of guilt. In this case, it is wise for the official to admit guilt, apologize and suggest he will seek help. After making such claims public, the official should remain silent unless new charges are made. Public statements should only refer to policymaking and the regular business of serving constituents.

The logic underlying this strategy is made apparent by the foregoing analyses. Citizens appear unwilling to punish official’s accused of salacious sexual misconduct at the ballot box, especially if the official is otherwise popular and effective (Fischle, 2000). Citizens may also resist, and even resent, intense scrutiny of sex scandals, placing more blame on press for seemingly unfair coverage than on the accused official (Marion, 2010). After the media

overcommitted itself to the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal, it became clear that there are limits to how much attention the press can give to the sexual activities of its elected leaders. The press is aware, in other words, that it must turn its attention away from a scandal eventually. New events will demand press attention turn elsewhere. Citizens may be initially interested in coverage of sex scandals, but will become frustrated if the media lingers too long on a particular scandal. The implication is clear: unless a sex scandal involves illegal activity, the official should remain in power. The official's own constituents will likely be willing to forgive him; only the media holds the power to act as an overzealous conduit for opposition party claims about the official's wrongdoing, and bring the official's career to a close. This power can be mitigated, with time.

**The Press.** There has been debate over whether the press has any real power, or whether it acts merely as a channel through which the power of officials is exercised (Schudson, 2011). Regardless of the power of the press in promoting scandal, scandal publicity adds legitimacy to official claims of misconduct, resulting in real world electoral outcomes. Whether the press is responsible for removing officials from office, or whether it acts simply as a conduit for partisan politics, the press inevitably brings unwanted attention to the seamy underside of the political world. The economic incentives and institutional routines that motivate scandal coverage have for-profit media habitually scrambling to the latest scandal, the democratic or legal ramifications of the scandal notwithstanding. Can the press, or should the press change its ways?

If one conceives the press to be a intermediary political institution, a "Fourth Branch of Government" that keeps citizens aware of government corruption, then the press should "properly calibrate" coverage to the level of the accused misconduct (Entman, 2012). The press could become more active in sorting the trivial and entertaining from the mundane and severe forms of political corruption transpiring in the hallowed halls of government. As it stands, the

press is not proactive in gauging scandal severity; it is reactionary. The media respond to claims of scandal with a knee-jerk reflex. Scandal coverage is almost an involuntary response to the new and sensational, and while individual reporters may deliberate on how much attention a particular scandal should be paid, this study makes clear that the journalistic community does not weigh carefully the import of a given case of official misbehavior. If they did, financial scandals that violate democratic norms would generate more coverage, on average, than sex scandals.

This study adds to a growing body of work (Entman, 2012; Fallows, 1997; Iyengar & Kinder, 2010; McChesney, 2004; Patterson, 1994; Patterson, 2013) that suggests that the press is ill equipped to handle the intricacies of official behavior. The press has the ability to ignore the lesser evils of elected representatives in favor of investigations that expose deeper forms of government corruption. Yet at the first whiff of a sensational story, and with official claims of misconduct at their disposal, the press responds with vigor. In the short term, this may generate public attention, potentially garnering more advertising revenue. However, the media also runs the risk of alienating their audiences through overzealous coverage (Marion, 2010) that focuses on infotainment and sensationalism. In the long term, public confidence in the news media's ability to report important information about government may be eroded if the press continues to focus on the trivial and inane controversies that afflict government personnel. What kinds of actions could individual journalists and editors, and the press as a whole, undertake to provide more accurate and balanced coverage of political scandal? There are several steps the press could take to adjust its coverage to correspond to the severity of a political scandal.

### **Recommendations for Scandal Coverage**

Based on this study's findings, there are several recommendations that may better calibrate scandal coverage to the severity of the alleged misconduct. Some of these

recommendations involve feasible, short-term alterations that could better attune press coverage to the seriousness of scandal. Others may seem like radical suggestions or unworkable solutions to the problem. In the long term, such recommendations may move from the realm of fantasy to reality, becoming more plausible as scandal coverage continues to miss the mark.

**Set Institutional Standards for Coverage.** Journalists may argue that an official's sexual misconduct may reveal something essential about their character that voters need to know in order to make informed democratic decisions (Entman, 2012). This study does not suggest that sex scandals should go publicity free. Sex scandals may indeed reveal a troubling pattern of abuse that suggests more serious offenses may be committed. However, an extramarital affair may reveal only that an official is suffering through a lonely marriage and has acted in a way that other people perceive as sexually deviant. Is it the job of the press to cover such private affairs, particularly if they pose no serious legal threat or violate campaign promises? Some journalists may respond in the affirmative. Nevertheless ethicists argue that public figures still maintain a "zone of privacy" in which personal matters may be off limits to enterprising reporters (Nelson et al., 2002). Do sex scandals fall within this zone of privacy? One way the press could acknowledge sex scandals without overcommitting attention would be to ask set institutional standards for scandal coverage. Specifically, journalists could be required to address several critical questions about the details of particular scandal scenarios before pursuing coverage.

First, does the sexual misconduct involve a clear and egregious abuse of office? Sex scandals range from private extramarital affairs that affect only the persons immediately involved in a romantic entanglement, to scandals like that of former South Carolina Governor Mark Sanford that include the abuse of taxpayer money to fund sexual liaisons in foreign

countries. If a sex scandal involves an abuse of office, especially one that uses public monies for private behavior, then such a scandal may warrant more extensive coverage.

Second, does the scandal involve illegal activity? Journalists could gauge coverage of sex scandals by asking whether the accusations include criminal misconduct. While an extramarital affair may be the private business of a politician and his spouse, an extramarital affair that involves a minor, for example, indicates that the official is willing to break the law. Both forms of extramarital affairs may be considered sexually deviant. Yet the latter type involves an additional layer of misconduct that damages the moral authority of the elected official. It indicates that the leader is willing to flout the rule of law, not simply social mores regulating how people should behave sexually. And such an accusation may warrant additional media attention.

Third, does the scandal violate campaign promises or policymaking objectives and promote a sense of hypocrisy? There is some debate about whether leaders should be held accountable for not meeting every campaign promise made during election season (Nelson et al., 2002; Patterson, 1994). The media tend to take representatives to task for unfulfilled campaign promises, even though the realities of governing often prevent candidates from fulfilling their promises once elected. While politicians rarely make specific promises about “not cheating” on their spouse, they sometimes make claims to moral leadership, or “restoring a sense of morality to Washington” upon election to political office. Constituents may perceive leaders who make such moral claims, and who pursue “moral [policy] agendas” while secretly engaging in what may be perceived as immoral sexual activity, as hypocrites. A case could be made that the media should pay more attention to these scandals, since they present a conflict between the official’s private behavior and their behavior as a candidate and as an elected representative.

An alternative way of gauging the extent of sex scandal coverage would be to employ Bok's (1999) "test of publicity." This test forces the decision maker – the reporter, in this case – to first consult their own conscience regarding the nature of their decision. How will non-stop coverage of a sex scandal damage the politician's reputation? What about the politician's spouse? What about his or her family? Second, Bok (1999) suggests that the decision maker should seek advice from friends and colleagues who can provide a detached but expert assessment of the situation. For a reporter assigned to cover a sex scandal, this may mean consulting journalists at other organizations. The key is start a dialogue about the scope and impact of the decision, in this case, the extent of coverage a sex scandal should receive. Finally, Bok (1999) suggests the decision maker should consult individuals who would be affected by the decision, or in lieu of this, engage in a hypothetical conversation with the individuals affected. Here the idea is to raise objections that the individual reporter or the reporter's colleagues may fail to realize, with the ultimate goal of Bok's (1999) test being to come to an ethical decision.

Imagine a media environment in which journalists were forced to confront the three questions mentioned above and Bok's (1999) test of publicity. If such institutional guidelines were mandatory, the majority of sex scandals would likely receive little or no attention. The Clinton-Lewinsky affair, for instance, may never have created such a stir had the media answered these questions before investigating. In fact, the Lewinsky affair may not have come to public attention at all. How would a lack of attention to the Lewinsky scandal affected perceptions of Clinton, or the media, or the Republican opposition? By 1998 it was already well known that Clinton was not the most faithful spouse, as much media attention had already been paid to previous scandals. If they had ignored the Lewinsky scandal, the media would not have suffered any backlash from the public for paying too much attention. The same would be true of



the Republican opposition in Congress, many of whom were revealed to be involved in sexual scandals in the process (Zaller, 1998). In sum, the trust that the public places in the “watchdog” press, the president and the congress may have been better off without any attention being paid to the Lewinsky scandal. This is mere speculation about a reality that does not exist. Were the media willing to adopt a standard for gauging scandal coverage, however, the Lewinsky scandal and that of Anthony Weiner’s would have never made headline news.

**Don’t Further Incentivize Partisan Scandal Warfare.** One reason that sex scandals may generate relatively more coverage than financial scandals is that opposition party officials know sex scandals will receive ample coverage. In this way, scandal coverage is like the chicken and the egg. It’s a problem of endogeneity, to put it in more technical terms. The question is which variable causes the other? Do partisan officials pay attention to the other side’s sexual misbehavior knowing that repeated statements about the scandal will create a media firestorm, or does the tendency for media to scrutinize sex scandals motivate partisans to pursue allegations of sexual misconduct? These are difficult questions to answer based on the available evidence. And yet the history of modern scandal coverage suggests both causal mechanisms may be at work. Partisans are likely aware that the media will lock on to accusations of misconduct, causing an image problem for the party that will eventually result in an official resignation and relinquishment of actual power. Meanwhile, the fact that it is journalistic routine to pay attention to official statements, and the evidence put forth here showing that the press pays substantial amounts of attention to political scandals, gives incentives for partisans to pursue scandals of even the most trivial, sexual variety. One way to disrupt this scenario is for blanket refusals to engage in partisan scandal warfare, to ignore partisan claims about sexual dalliances.

Reporters may react negatively to this recommendation, perhaps with good reason. Since institutional routines dictate that reporters rely on official sources for coverage, reporters who ignore partisan claims of sexual misconduct may risk alienating and losing their sources. A reporter's ability to "work their sources" is in many ways the foundation of his livelihood. Moreover, partisan deliberation and debate is supposed to be a major part of front-page news (Schudson, 1981). So, why shouldn't a reporter follow up on official statements about sexual misconduct? After all, one role of a democratic press is to relay political information to the public, and what is a political sex scandal but political information? And isn't it unfair to tell journalists how to do their job, when the First Amendment protects their speech?

All of these concerns are warranted. The fact remains, however, that by giving a platform to trivial partisan scandal warfare, journalists may inadvertently undermine the very principles that protect their speech. It may be a journalist's job to report political information, and it is essential for the journalist to do so in an uninhibited fashion. Reporting on sex scandals may generate audience interest, at least for a time, and enhance a news organization economically. Nevertheless, by devoting wall-to-wall coverage to partisan bickering over trivial sexual minutia, the press may give credence to critics like Representative Jay Rockefeller of West Virginia, who suggested the press is overly partisan, focused on entertainment rather than hard-hitting public affairs and should therefore be curtailed (Stelter, 2010). By focusing on entertaining sex scandals, the press may give more value to arguments that threaten their constitutional guarantees.

**Consider Long-Term Audience Interests and Benefits.** If the media produces news "products" for "consumers" (Hamilton, 2004; McManus, 1994; 1995) it should be wary of alienating its consumer base. Important to this recommendation is that what is more sensational and entertaining and flashy is not always what is best for the "consumer" or the citizen. What is

the news business, similar in many ways to other commercial organizations, willing to risk? Would a car company risk building expensive, flashy sedans that occasionally and spontaneously explode if it knew that the public would find out and cease buying the car? Would a clothing retailer sell a luxurious, flamboyantly colored and popular line of shirts that also contained highly toxic chemicals if it thought the public would discover the deception and stop buying the line? Would the news media continue to publicize sensational but trivial information about political sex scandals while downplaying deeper forms of government corruption if news producers thought their audiences and advertising revenues would dry up? News is, in part, an information product. And citizens can drop any product like a bad habit.

In the short term, it makes sense for the press to be “scandal-minded” (Fallows, 1997), to pay heed to claims about official misconduct, no matter how trivial. The question is whether this style of reporting will provide long-term economic sustainability. Over the past decade, the mainstream press has taken major economic hits, forcing newsrooms to cut their professional staff, streamline the production process, and focus on soft news to compete with more entertaining fare and garner younger audience interest (Hamilton, 2004). The hit to the news business is thought to have come from the advent of the Internet and mainstream news organizations’ inability to recognize the power of that new medium. Indeed, news organizations may have sown the seeds of their own destruction when they put free content online during the early days of the Internet. Audiences now expect free content. The 2008 economic recession also hit the news industry hard, creating further cutbacks and layoffs. Thousands of journalism jobs that had existed before the 2008 recession simply were not replaced. Between the Internet and the 2008 recession, mainstream journalism has not recovered its previous vitality.

The roots of the problem with the economy of the press run deeper, however, than the advent of the Internet and the 2008 recession. For decades, the American public has been dissatisfied with how the press covers politics and Gallup polling shows a majority of Americans now say they do not trust the mainstream press (Gallup, 2012). The press is routinely one of the most disliked institutions of American society, if not of American government. Why is that so? One reason may be an increasingly “scandal-minded” press that pays more attention to entertaining political gamesmanship than to policy and substance (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Entman, 2012; Fallows, 1997; Patterson, 1994; Pingree, 2011). Citizens, especially highly interested and aware citizens, want to know about government corruption. They do not want the press to focus on the trivial and sensational at the expense of substance. The press needs the ability to exercise its freedom of speech uninhibited. The press may benefit economically from publishing sensational scandal news in the short term. Yet without paying attention to long-term audience issue interests and democratic benefits, the press risks disaffecting audiences. It risks its bottom line. Most importantly, the press risks its seat at the table of American democracy.

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## APPENDIX A. SCANDAL CASES IN PEW CONTENT ANALYSIS

<b>Legislative Branch Scandal (Years analyzed)</b>	<b>Favors Dems/Reps?</b>	<b>Type</b>	<b>Total News Stories</b>
Anthony Weiner (D-NY) “sexting” (2011)	Reps	Sexual	237
Bob Ney (R-OH) involvement in Abramoff scandal (2007-2008)	Dems	Financial	14
Charlie Rangel (D-NY) House ethics controversy and censure (2009-2010)	Reps	Financial	204
David Wu (D-OR) accused of sexually assaulting a teenage girl (2011)	Reps	Sexual	15
Eric Massa (D-NY) “tickling” harassment (2010)	Reps	Sexual	60
GOP bondage scandal (2010)	Dems	Sexual	33
John Ensign (R-NV) affair (2009-2011)	Dems	Sexual	91
Larry Craig (R-ID) arrested for lewd behavior in airport restroom (2007-2008)	Dems	Sexual	383
Mark Foley (R-FL) congressional page sex scandal (2007-2008)	Dems	Sexual	14
Mark Souder (R-IN) extramarital affair (2010)	Dems	Sexual	4
Maxine Waters (D-CA) House ethics trial (2010)	Reps	Financial	28
Ted Stevens (R-AL) home renovation scandal (2007-2008)	Dems	Financial	233
Tim Mahoney (D-FL) sex scandal (2008)	Reps	Sexual	11
William Jefferson (D-LA) bribery scandal (2007-2008)	Reps	Financial	74

DC escort scandal (2007-2008)	Dems	Sexual	99
Abramoff scandal in general (2007-2011)	Dems	Financial	24
Former Senator John Edwards (D-NC) affair (2008-2012)	Reps	Sexual	418

Note: *n* number of stories derived from Pew News Coverage Index (NCI), 2007-2012.

<b>Executive Branch Scandal (Years analyzed)</b>	<b>Favors Dems/Reps?</b>	<b>Type</b>	<b>Total News Stories</b>
Paul Wolfowitz Worldbank affair (2007)	Dems	Sexual	81
Norman Hsu fundraising scandal (2009)	Reps	Financial	24
Interior Department sex for oil scandal (2009)	Reps	Sexual	22
Solyndra controversy (2011)	Reps	Financial	92
Secret service prostitution scandal (2012)	Reps	Sexual	165

Note: Cell entries represent *n* number of stories about political scandal, by news source.

<b>Judicial Branch Scandal (Years analyzed)</b>	<b>Favors Dems/Reps?</b>	<b>Type</b>	<b>Total News Stories</b>
Clearance Thomas' wife calls Anita Hill requesting apology for accusations	Dems	Sexual	21

Note: Cell entries represent *n* number of stories about political scandal, by news source.

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<b>Gubernatorial Scandal (Years analyzed)</b>	<b>Favors Dems/Reps?</b>	<b>Type</b>	<b>Total News Stories</b>
Mark Sanford disappearance and affair (2009-2011)	Dems	Sexual	214
Governor Rod Blagojevich (D-IL) senate seat scandal (2008-2011)	Reps	Financial	1,282
Former Governor Jon Corzine (D-NJ) MF Global scandal	Reps	Financial	30
Governor Eliot Spitzer (D-NY) hired prostitutes	Reps	Sexual	286

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Note: Cell entries represent  $n$  number of stories about political scandal, by news source.

## APPENDIX B. EXPERIMENTAL TREATMENTS

they have imposed a limited monetary system on the global economy

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# Hall admits to improper sexual relationships

By John Simpson | Staff Writer

After dodging questions for nearly a week, Republican Senator Sam Hall admitted today that he had multiple extramarital affairs and apologized for behavior he characterized as “disgraceful.”

“Let me just be explicit that I am admitting to it, to having affairs,” Hall said in an interview this afternoon. “My personal behavior has been unacceptable.”

In the approximately 20-minute long interview, Hall did not say exactly how many women he had affairs with. “I don’t know what other women are going to come out,” he said.

But he discussed one woman specifically. He said a passionate affair with Miss Barbara Allen began during his 2008 campaign and had gone on intermittently until 2010.

He said his relationship with Allen – a former campaign worker and one-time employee in his federal office “was totally inappropriate.”

“It shows terrible judgment on my part,” he said, adding, “To allow myself to be put into that position was just stupid.”

Hall said that Republican Senator



*Republican Senator Sam Hall*

John Cornyn had confronted him in 2008 about his extramarital affair and said “if that’s happening, stop.”

“It wasn’t a discussion, it wasn’t a meeting, it was a statement,” Hall said.

Asked why he didn’t heed such warnings he said he’d made a series of bad decisions.

While he said the people of his state deserved better leadership, he said he would let them decide whether his personal indiscretions disqualified him from office.

“I let them down and I apologize for that,” he said.

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## History’s lesson in Afghanistan

## Hall admits to improper sexual relationships

By John Simpson | Staff Writer

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## History’s lesson in Afghanistan



## Hall admits to improper use of campaign funds

By John Simpson | Staff Writer

After dodging questions for nearly a week, Republican Senator Sam Hall admitted today that he used campaign funds to buy \$58,000 worth of luxury items and apologized for behavior he characterized as “disgraceful.”

“Let me just be explicit that I am admitting to it, to using the money,” Hall said in an interview this afternoon. “My personal behavior has been unacceptable.”

In the approximately 20-minute long interview, Hall did not say exactly how much money he had taken from campaign funds over the years. “I don’t know what’s going to come out,” he said.

But he discussed one item specifically. He said he purchased a \$25,000 gold-plated men’s Rolex watch in 2008 which he had repaired by a jeweler in 2010.

He said his misuse of campaign funds – including funds from previous runs for the U.S. House and U.S. Senate “was totally inappropriate.”

“It shows terrible judgment on my part,” he said, adding, “To allow myself to be put into that position was just stupid.”

Hall said that Republican Senator



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## History’s lesson in Afghanistan

## APPENDIX C. SCANDAL CASES IN U.S. HOUSE ELECTORAL MODEL

Name	PID	Type	Description	Result
Brown, Corrine	D	F	Allegedly took \$10,000 check from church leader Henry Lyons	Won
Campbell, John	R	F	Investigated for fundraising activities during a vote on financial reform	Won
Chenoweth, Helen	R	S	Admitted that she had carried on a six-year affair with married rancher Vernon Ravenscroft	Won
Clarke, Yvette	D	F	Allegedly took trip to Caribbean funded by Carib News	Won
Condit, Gary	D	S	Had extramarital affair with intern Chandra Levy	Lost
Crowley, Joseph	D	F	Investigated for fundraising activities during a vote on financial reform	Won
Cunningham, Randy "Duke"	R	F	Improper financial relationships with defense contracting firm MZM Inc.	Resigned
DeLay, Tom	R	F	Money laundering; involvement in Abramoff scandal; numerous power violations	Resigned
Dicks, Norm	D	F	Investigated by House Ethics Committee for connections with lobbyist Pual Magliochetti (PMA)	Won
Doolittle, John	R	F	Tainted campaign contributions, from Indian tribes and from Abramoff; involved in Abramoff scandal	Won
Feeney, Tom	R	F	Took trips on Abramoff's dime; took \$1,000 from Jack Abramoff	Won
Foley, Mark	R	S	Asked male congressional pages to send photos of themselves to him; caught with sexually explicit text messages from pages	Resigned
Fossella, Vito	R	S	Admitted to having an affair and fathering child out of wedlock	Lost

Graves, Sam	R	F	Alleged to use small business committee chairmanship to get friend to testify on biofuels	Won
Harris, Katherine	R	F	Took illegal campaign contributions	Lost
Hastert, Dennis	R	S	Covered up Mark Foley sex scandal	Lost
Hensarling, Jeb	R	F	Investigated for fundraising activities during a vote on financial reform	Won
Hyde, Henry	R	S	From 1965 to 1969, Hyde conducted an extramarital affair with Cherie Snodgrass	Won
Jackson, Jesse Jr.	D	F	Thought to be Senate candidate number 5, considered by Blagojevich to fulfill Obama's seat in exchange for raising funds	Won
Jefferson, William	D	F	Demanded bribes in exchange for his help in promoting a pair of business deals in Africa	Won
Kaptur, Marcy	D	F	Investigated by House Ethics Committee for connections with lobbyist Pual Magliochhetti (PMA)	Won
Kilpatrick, Carolyn Cheeks	D	F	Allegedly took trip to Caribbean funded by Carib News	Lost
Kolbe, Jim	R	S	Helped cover up Mark Foley page sex scandal	Lost
Lee, Christopher	R	S	Sent shirtless photo to transsexual prostitute via Craigslist; soliciting sex	Resigned
Lewis, Charles Jeremy	R	F	Used position to steer clients to Lowery lobbying firm, which got them \$; Lowery then gave campaign \$ to Lewis	Won
Livingston, Bob	R	S	Had extramarital affair	Resigned
Lucas, Frank	R	F	Investigated for fundraising activities	Won
Mahoney, Tim	D	S	Mahoney paid hush money to a mistress to conceal an extramarital affair	Lost

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Massa, Eric	D	S	Groped multiple male staffers; Sexual harassment	Resigned
Mollohan, Alan	D	F	Misrepresented his assets on financial disclosure forms	Won
Moran, Jerry	R	F	Investigated by House Ethics Committee for connections with lobbyist Pual Magliochhetti (PMA)	Won
Ney, Bob	R	F	Investigated for bribery implicated in Abarmoff scandals	Resigned
Payne, Donald	D	F	Allegedly took trip to Caribbean funded by Carib News	Won
Pomeroy, Earl	D	F	Investigated for fundraising activities during a vote on financial reform	Lost
Price, Tom	R	F	Investigated for fundraising activities during a vote on financial reform	Won
Rangel, Charles	D	F	Didn't pay taxes on Dominican home	Won
Renzi, Rick	R	F	Conspiracy, fraud, money laundering, etc.	Won
Schrock, Ed	R	S	Allegedly had sex with a male prostitute	Resigned
Shuster, E.G. Bud	R	F	Violated House Gift Rules and had poor records of campaign expenditures; power issues related to Ann Eppard	Won
Souder, Mark	R	S	Resigned after admitting to an affair with a female staff member	Resigned
Stark, Fortney Pete	D	F	Allegedly claimed Maryland home as primary residence to get tax exemption	Won
Thompson, Bennie	D	F	Allegedly took trip to Carribean funded by Carib News	Won
Tiahrt, Todd	R	F	Investigated by House Ethics Committee for connections with lobbyist Pual Magliochhetti (PMA)	Lost

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Watt, Melvin	D	F	Investigated for fundraising activities	Won
Visclosky, Peter	D	F	Investigated by House Ethics Committee for connections with lobbyist Pual Magliochhetti (PMA),	Won
Waters, Maxine	D	F	Investigated by House EC for trying to funnel federal funds to her husband's OneUnited Bank	Won
Weiner, Anthony	D	S	Sent sexually explicit messages to women	Resigned
Weldon, Curt	R	F	Used his influence to secure lobbying and consulting contracts for his daughter	Lost
Wu, David	D	S	Admitted to an aggressive sexual encounter with the teenage daughter of a longtime friend and campaign donor	Resigned
Young, Bill	R	F	Investigated by House Ethics Committee for connections with lobbyist Pual Magliochhetti (PMA)	Won
Young, Don	R	F	Investigated for illegal campaign contributions	Won

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Note: The “electoral outcome” reflects the electoral outcome following revelations of a scandal.

# APPENDIX D. ALTERNATIVE ELECTORAL OUTCOMES MODEL USING CNN

	<b>Lose Reelection (vs. Win Reelection)</b>		<b>Resign (vs. Win Reelection)</b>	
	<i>b (SE)</i>	<i>b (SE)</i>	<i>b (SE)</i>	<i>b (SE)</i>
<b><u>Controls</u></b>				
Tenure	-0.02 (0.03)	-0.02 (0.03)	<b>-0.11*</b> <b>(0.05)</b>	<b>-0.14*</b> <b>(0.06)</b>
Leader	-1.03 (1.29)	-0.88 (1.07)	0.33 (0.70)	0.31 (0.70)
Republican	-0.70 (0.73)	-0.54 (0.70)	0.41 (0.97)	0.49 (1.08)
Vote Share	<b>-0.11†</b> <b>(0.06)</b>	<b>-0.10†</b> <b>(0.05)</b>	-0.04 (0.06)	-0.03 (0.06)
<b><u>IVs</u></b>				
Financial Scandal	-0.70 (1.02)	-0.85 (1.03)	<b>-2.07†</b> <b>(1.06)</b>	<b>-2.29*</b> <b>(1.06)</b>
Media Exposure	<b>0.02**</b> <b>(0.01)</b>	-0.01 (0.02)	<b>0.03***</b> <b>(0.01)</b>	<b>0.04***</b> <b>(0.01)</b>
<b><u>Interaction</u></b>				
Scandal X Media	---	<b>-0.70†</b> <b>(0.39)</b>	---	0.19 (0.41)
<i>Pseudo R<sup>2</sup></i>	33.27%	35.62%	33.27%	43.19%
<i>Log Likelihood</i>	-37.79***	-36.46***	-37.79***	-26.94***
<i>N</i>	51	51	51	51
<i>PRE</i>	30.40%	26.10%	30.40%	26.10%

Note: \*\*\*p<.001, \*\*p<.01, \*p<.05, †p<.10.

Alternative model using CNN transcripts mentioning political scandal, 1996-2012.

## **VITA**

Chance York is a native of Wamego, Kansas. He received a bachelor's degree in English Literature and Anthropology from the University of Kansas in 2008. He received a master's degree in Mass Communication from Kansas State University in 2010. As his interests grew in political communication research, he decided to pursue a Ph.D. in Mass Communication at Louisiana State University's Manship School of Mass Communication. He will receive his Ph.D. in May 2014 and plans to work as a professor of mass communication at a research university.