

Political Scandal in American Politics

Introduction

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Political scandal can reveal much about the character of modern politics and politicians, and, in turn, about the ramifications of violations of this ethos on political selection and governing. Pfiffner (2004) argues that there is a “widespread consensus” in American politics that “character is just as important as intellect, organizational abilities, television presence, or effective public speaking” (6). Variations and violations of the implicit oath of reasonable harmony and clean governing are not tolerated by voters, although this norm is changing as well. Fousek and Wasserman (2010) argue that “the public has continued to demand ethical leadership from its elected representatives” (2). Such character issues are associated with political responsiveness to the public, political judgments, fidelity to ones convictions, and democratic legitimacy (Galston 2010). Scandals, and the events that precipitate or follow, have the potential to damage these often delicate relationships, especially in the aftermath of major violations. These effects are true for those in office and those seeking office. The depths of these effects, however, need to be more fully explored. The articles in this symposium expand the study of political scandal horizontally and vertically through new data and new outcomes that justify the importance of further study of political scandals.

Scandals clearly damage the reputations of public officials, sometimes irreparably. Political prevarication has shaped the post-World War II history, and “dishonesty about key matters of state—whether moral or immoral—is ultimately and invariably self-destructive” (Alterman 2004, 22). Of course, specific personal actions produce lasting effects on politicians and on American politics. Busby (1999) notes that “the presidency of William Jefferson Clinton was blighted by accusation of scandal, personal indiscretion, and inappropriate private conduct. For all the president’s public achievements, it appears likely that Clinton’s presidential legacy will be forever tarnished by scandal” (1). Illinois governor George Ryan was acclaimed nationally and internationally for his ending of capital punishment in Illinois, yet his moral policy legacy was tarnished by his involvement in several scandals, eventually leading to him leaving office in disgrace and serving time in prison. High hopes

for congressman Anthony Weiner’s progressive career in politics were cut short by a Twitter scandal that toppled his prospects for career advancement (in Congress or as mayor of New York City). Frontrunner (at the time) for the Republican nomination for president Herman Cain’s campaign was felled by allegations of sexual harassment. The list goes on and on.

It is not a stretch to say that being associated with a scandal will harm the popularity of a politician. Newman and Forchimes (2010) argue that negative events, such as scandals, have negative effects on presidential approval. They find that many scandals, including the emerging of the Iran-Contra scandal, the resignation of John Sununu and the exposure of the scandals at the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, in addition to other negative events, contribute negatively to presidential approval. Although scandals tend to hurt the approval ratings of a politician, the public can distinguish between behavior it believes central to the actor’s job and those it considers private (Renshon 2002). In fact, in isolated instances, presidents may actually maintain or even expand their popularity, depending on the specific conditions that are present (Rottinghaus and Bereznikova 2006; Zaller 1998). Prior approval of a politician and perceptions of the importance of the scandal also shape the attitudes of the public. In the case of President Clinton during the Lewinsky scandal, citizens “construct seemingly reasonable justifications” for what they believed and wanted to continue to believe: that the president was an effective leader (Fischle 2000, 151).

Despite the wealth of interesting studies on scandal in American politics, important questions still remain to be asked and answered with respect to the impact of scandal on the political system. Which candidates sustain greater political damage when confronting and recovering from allegations of scandal? Which voters are more reactive to which type of scandalous events and to which types of political scandal are partisan voters more sensitive? How long do scandals last and what factors (economic, political, institutional) hasten an end to an official’s political life? Are some scandals more damaging to the policy-making process or a party’s electoral prospects than others? In the aftermath of scandals, what are the institutional implications of efforts to reform? Are there partisan overtones to these efforts? In covering political scandal, what factors predict greater (and continuing) media coverage?

The need to address these questions is pressing. The consequences of scandal are connected to the fate of many elected officials, those seeking office, political parties, and accountable governing. Yet, there is still much to explain. Scholars often

examine one element of a scandal or a single individual (a governor in crisis, the life span of a nominee). Journalists focus on salacious aspects of a handful of select scandals and ignore many others. Media commentators oversell the importance of

system. Likewise, the contributors here demonstrate that certain individuals forgive candidates for past scandals and some scandals have more prominent impacts on party success. These timely articles can ultimately inform us about the dynamics of who gets

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a single scandal that may be minor in scope while minimizing others that may have lasting consequences. At the outbreak of each new scandal, fresh speculation rises from the media about the survival of each politician or the effects on their legacy. Williams (1998) laments that “there is no obvious correspondence between the degree of controversy generated by scandals and the gravity of the alleged misdeeds. Some of those involved in scandals pay a heavy price: resignation, disgrace and even imprisonment. Others, who seem equally culpable, escape conviction and retire with dignity” (2). If the precise effects of scandals are to be examined, research must provide thorough scholarship on these consequential matters.

The articles in this symposium, which grew out of a conference on political scandal and corruption at Loyola University Chicago in 2013, address these questions and frame the study of political scandal in a new light. First, these articles expand the study of political scandal vertically by including new types of data. Investigations into the typology of media coverage of scandal and the loss of support for presidential candidates highlight this contribution. Second, these articles expand the analysis of scandals horizontally by including new factors and ramifications to electoral and governing scandals. For instance, modern politics is replete with the allegations and counter allegations as part of the routine business of hardball politics. Studies in this symposium show that the accused in both parties often cry “partisan politics” to allegations they deem to be politically motivated, especially in efforts to reform the political

selected for office, who stays in office, how governing works in the aftermath of a crisis, and the politics of ethical (“good government”) reform. ■

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