REFRAMING THE GENDER GAP IN AMERICAN POLITICAL SEX SCANDALS IN THE #METOO ERA

Hinda Mandell

The roots of American political sex scandals run deep, and can be dug up all the way back to the founding of the Republic (Summers, 2000). Yet media coverage today focusing on raucous and raunchy politicians is significantly more aggressive, and certainly a more contemporary phenomenon.

Perhaps the first example of a contemporary political sex scandal, replete with voracious media coverage that caught unfolding impropriety in real time, belongs to presidential candidate Gary Hart’s “Monkey Business” in 1987 (Bai, 2015). The public has been eager to consume news coverage of political sex scandals, which generates a moral discourse about sex, gender, and power (Bauer, 2008; Berlant & Duggan, 2001; Thompson, 1995). Consider this: The Pew Research Center found that sex-scandal stories take up much space within a news cycle (Anderson, 2013). For instance, news about then New York Governor Eliot Spitzer’s prostitution ring entanglement occupied 23 percent of the news cycle from March 10 to March 16, when he resigned from office in 2008. Media coverage of then Idaho Senator Larry Craig occupied 17 percent of the news cycle from June 22 to June 28, 2009, after charges of lewd conduct in a Minneapolis airport became public. Similarly, coverage of then South Carolina Governor Mark Sanford’s extramarital affair occupied 11 percent of the news cycle from June 22 to June 28, 2009, when it was revealed that he was romantically involved with a woman who was not his wife in Argentina – rather than hiking the Appalachian Trail as he previously said. Over time, media coverage of politicians’ mistakes has been found to blossom, as stories about one scandal generate interest about other scandals, crowding out other, less scintillating, news (Balkin, 1999).

Yet the fact remains that, despite the plethora of philandering politicians, and with a fervent media always ready to deploy its legions of reporters, talking heads, and commentators when scandal becomes public – offering rapid-fire updates as news of the transgression unfolds (Apostolidis and Williams, 2004) – there has never been a major political sex scandal where the woman, as the powerful figure, was caught with her proverbial pants down (Mandell, 2017a). When it comes to political sex scandals, women typically occupy one of two roles: as the political wife or as the mistress. With the former role, women are charged with carrying out their wifely duties, embodying the gender norms of her sex (West and Zimmerman, 1987). With the latter role, women are cast into a cloying, money-grubbing, and fame-seeking frame (Mandell, 2017b).
In the wake of the #MeToo movement that began in fall 2017, a tsunami of personal stories burst forth from the social media stratosphere, claiming the careers of male elites in industries as diverse as Hollywood, the culinary arts, entertainment, news, nonprofits, and politics.

I have been researching and writing about the gender gap in American politics since 2008, and my work has focused on how the gendered construction of power drives public reaction to scandal and foments distrust in the political system. While a scandal researcher can easily identify instances in which a male politician engages in illicit sex acts that strangled his career which are not connected to workplace sexual harassment of misconduct,\(^1\) it is worth revisiting the role of top-down workplace harassment in congressional and district offices, and on the campaign trail, as a major source of scandal activity.\(^2\)

Any casual observer of American politics knows that there has historically been a plethora of male politicians, and a lack of female politicians, who are at the center of political sex scandals in the U.S. As I note in my book, *Sex Scandals, Gender, and Power in Contemporary American Politics* (Mandell, 2017a), women hold about 20 percent of congressional seats, but they do not account for 20 percent of sex scandals. (Can you recall a time in recent memory when an elite, female politician stole the headlines?) But it’s not hard to pull from our memories examples of male-led political sex scandals. The *Washington Post* reported in 2014 that of the 39 major such scandals that occurred since 1974, all involved men, with a partisan split of 17 Democrats and 22 Republicans. In my book, I come to the conclusion that the absence of female-led political sex scandals may reflect expected norms of gendered behavior that emerge long before a person chooses to run for office. For instance, political scientists Jennifer L. Lawless and Richard L. Fox surveyed a random sample of about 2,100 college students and queried them about their political aspirations. They found in their 2013 report, “Girls Just Wanna Not Run: The Gender Gap in Young Americans’ Political Ambition,” that “young women are less likely than young men ever to have considered running for office, to express interest in a candidacy at some point in the future, or to consider elective office a desirable profession” (Lawless & Fox, 2013).

The #MeToo movement represents a powerful consciousness-raising shift in the broader American culture, and we continue to see a similar script within the sex-scandal ecosphere, where male politicians have been outed for misbehavior. Whether there’s been an uptick in such occurrences due to the #MeToo movement is beyond the scope of this chapter but it should be considered for future research endeavors.

In the fallout from the #MeToo social movement initiated in fall 2017, we’ve witnessed nine instances from November 2017 to June 2018 (at the time of writing) of prominent political officials in the U.S. facing severe allegations of sexual harassment and misconduct within a workplace setting by this researcher’s count alone. The following list does not claim to be exhaustive but involves the male politicians who faced sexual harassment charges or sexual misconduct allegations where news of such incidents rose to national prominence and received national media coverage.

---

1. In November 2017, Steven T. McLaughlin, a New York State Assemblyman, was disciplined for sexual harassment “after an investigation by the Assembly’s ethics committee found he had asked a female Assembly staff member for naked pictures” (Maslin Nir, 2018).

2. Michigan Congressman John D. Conyers, a Democrat, resigned in December 2017 amid sexual harassment and sexual misconduct allegations made by multiple women going back decades. The former congressman even paid a settlement of $27,000 to one of his accusers, a former aide (Naylor & Montanaro, 2017).

3. The Arizona Republican Trent Franks, a congressman, announced his resignation in December 2017 after he learned he was under investigation by the House Ethics Committee.
“regarding my discussion of surrogacy with two previous female subordinates, making each feel uncomfortable,” he said in a written statement (Bade, Cheney & Schneider, 2017).

Minnesotan Senator Al Franken, a Democrat, resigned in January 2018 after news broke that he inappropriately kissed, and later groped, an entertainer with whom he was performing on a 2006 United Service Organizations (USO) tour. Other women subsequently came forward detailing sexually assaulting behavior. “Multiple women claimed that Franken inappropriately touched them or attempted to kiss them” (Martinez, 2018).

That same month, a New York State Senator, Joe Klein, a Democrat, was “accused by a former staff member of forcibly kissing her outside an Albany bar in 2015” (McKinley, 2018). The senator has denied the misconduct allegations.

Also in December 2018, the Republican Congressman Blake Farenthold announced he wouldn’t seek reelection in 2018, “following allegations that he harassed female staff members and created a poor environment in his office” (Naylor, 2017).

That same month the Nevada Democrat Ruben Kihuen, a Democrat, said he too would not seek reelection following accusations that he sexually harassed women, including a staffer on his 2016 congressional campaign and a lobbyist when he worked as a state legislator in Nevada (Viebeck, 2017).

Pennsylvania Republican, Congressman Patrick Meehan, announced in January 2018 that he wouldn’t seek reelection following a sexual harassment scandal in which he paid his former aide a tax-funded settlement. He had previously confided to this younger female aide that he was attracted to her. Meehan was serving on the House Ethics Committee, the body that investigates and censures congress members who have breached professional propriety, when news of the settlement broke (Detrow, 2018).

Lastly, for this chapter at least, the casino magnate Steve Wynn (while himself not an elected official) resigned as the Republican National Committee finance chairman when accusations of sexual misconduct by female employees at Wynn Resorts surfaced (Isenstadt, 2018). Wynn has denied the allegations.

Sexual harassment and political sex scandals

From a quantitative perspective, the categories of “sexual harassment” and “sexual relations with a female subordinate” appear frequently in my categorization of political sex scandals in the U.S. Incidents involving sexual harassment are present in 30.8 percent of scandals involving Democrats, making it the third most common category of scandals involving Democrats (Mandell, 2017a, 29). The category of sexual harassment is not in the top-10 categories for Republican politicians. Sex with a female subordinate occurs in 25 percent of scandals involving Democrats and 17.1 percent of those involving Republicans (ibid.). And, indeed, according to my previous research the top-10 most frequently occurring scandal attributes for politicians serving in Congress, as governor, or in the White House, “sex with a female subordinate” and “sexual harassment” rank two and four accordingly (ibid., 27). In other words, these are frequently occurring events whose impacts on the legislative system in the U.S., and with implications for an already divided and polarized electorate, demand further and future study.

Before proceeding with an extended analysis of this chapter’s focus, the 2018 scandal involving Pennsylvania Congressman Patrick Meehan and his unnamed (in media accounts) female subordinate, it is worth noting the categorical distinction between “sexual harassment” and “sex with a female subordinate.” Previously, I conceptualized the former as incidents where a subordinate, such as a staff member or an intern, received unwanted attention from her (male) boss and came forward publicly with these claims. In the latter, I conceptualized these incidents.
as consensual sexual activity between boss and subordinate. But while there are qualitative distinctions between these two categories I am not sure they are conceptually useful. After all, we know, or should know, that an imbalance of power may likely make it impossible for a female subordinate, whose salary is significantly less than that of her powerful male boss, and who is often quite younger, to consent to a sexual relationship in an equal manner as her boss – a political elite – even if she does not view it as sexual harassment or sexual misconduct.

As political operative Kristin Nicholson explained in a series of tweets following news reports that California Congresswoman Jackie Speier said publicly in October 2017 that Capitol Hill must reform the way it responds to sexual harassment and misconduct allegations, “It’s a melting pot of powerful, respected public figures & young, ambitious public servants – and few if any layers of barriers between” (Nicholson, 2017a). In an October 27, 2017 tweet Nicholson foregrounded her barrage of tweets with the preface that she worked on Capitol Hill “for 20yrs, most as Chief of Staff” (Nicholson, 2017b). She added that “the most and least senior, the most and least powerful, interact constantly in performing their daily professional duties” (Nicholson, 2017c), which creates a dynamic that is “fraught with potential for exploitation” (Nicholson, 2017d).

In the wake of this crop of sexual harassment scandals, the House passed landmark legislation in February 2018 to overhaul sexual harassment legislation on Capitol Hill. The new legislation would streamline the process for victims to register their complaints, would appoint them with and advocate, and would prevent elected officials from using taxpayer money to fund harassment and misconduct settlements (Marcos, 2018).

While noting the scandal-tarnished backdrop of political resignations and crises as listed above, this chapter focuses exclusively on the scandal involving Pennsylvania Republican Congressman Patrick Meehan, paying particular care to the gendered nature of scandal through the deconstruction of a letter that Meehan sent to a female aide working for him in his office. Because Meehan released a copy of this letter to news outlets in the wake of the scandal’s publicity in January 2018, we have a unique scandal artifact: an item written for the private audience of one, at least initially, but then brought into the public sphere as the congressman attempted to prove the “innocent” nature of his affection for his subordinate. Following this particular scandal’s fallout, Meehan announced that he would not seek reelection in the 2018 midterms.

Meehan wrote the letter to his aide, dated May 4, 2017, following an ice cream outing with her that occurred on May 3, 2017 (Taylor, 2017). According to screenshots of a text exchange between the congressman and the aide that Meehan released to the public along with the handwritten letter, he asked her: “You want to take some time and go out for ice cream on Wed after the tele town hall? It might be nice. It was an intense week and I feel I added unnecessary tension and I do [sic] don’t want you to be the brunt of it. Now I feel very bad” (ibid.). Following their ice cream outing, Meehan placed a note to the aide in her drawer: “Thank you for your very kind words and for your friendship. [smiley face emoji] I appreciate your letting me in on where you are. Enjoy the weekend and take some time to relax!” (ibid.).

In an attempt at damage control, no doubt, following news that he later used taxpayer money to settle the sexual harassment case brought by his aide, Meehan released the texts to demonstrate the “friendly” nature of their texts, and particularly her “positive” response after receiving his intimate letter. Indeed, Meehan told the New York Times in an interview that the aide “specially invited’ his intimate communications, and that he was emotionally wounded when she filed a complaint against him” (Vogel & Rogers, 2018). The ice cream outing, which Meehan suggested and which connotes a childlike innocence, coupled with his response of being distraught over her complaint in response to his behavior, indicates (from an outside observer) a type of delusional orientation toward the aide that his behavior was appropriate because it was
rooted in harmless, non-physical activities like eating ice cream behavior, undercutting the power of personal dynamics, language, and contrived intimacy in a workplace setting.

In this chapter I employ narrative inquiry to unpack the congressman’s letter to his aide as a tool for deconstructing the text and the gendered nature of power embedded in this artifact that led to the aide bringing a complaint against her boss.

"It is commonplace to note that human beings both live and tell stories about their living,” writes D. Jean Clandinin. “These lived and told stories and talk about those stories are ways we create meaning in our lives as well as ways we enlist each other’s help in building our lives and communities” (Clandinin, 2006, 51). Storytelling represents a portal through which a person interacts with his or her world and extracts meaning. It is therefore a ripe site for analysis. “Narrative inquiry, the study of experience as story, then, is first and foremost a way of thinking about experience.” This narrative approach explores an object of the everyday – in this case the contents of a private letter – and privileges it as a key to understand experience and life situations. By shifting storytelling from the periphery to the center we are assured of their value to unlock lived experience. As Clandinin writes with powerful provocation: “The truth about stories is that that’s all we are” (ibid.). By focusing on the congressman’s letter we can better understand how he understands himself in orientation to the aide with whom he acted inappropriately.

The work of Joanne Martin (1990) can act as a template for deconstructing and then reconstructing stories of organizational taboo. In a journal article on such taboos, Martin retells an anecdote shared by a prominent (although unnamed) CEO at an industry conference. By deconstructing that story from a feminist standpoint, and then reconstructing it by changing small portions of the text, Martin demonstrates how the retelling of an artifact of lived experience can reveal an imbalance in the power structure that is connected to the workplace. I also used this approach in my book, focusing specifically on how New York State assembly members personalized scandal stories about boundary-crossing.

Martin outlines nine steps or “analytic strategies used in deconstruction” (ibid., 355). "Deconstruction,” writes Martin, “is able to reveal ideological assumptions in a way that is particularly sensitive to the suppressed interests of members of disempowered, marginalized groups” (ibid., 340). Since Meehan clearly believes in his innocence – despite settling the complaint to his former aide with a $40,000 payment (Tamari & Brennan, 2018) – a deconstruction proves valuable because it “peels away the layers of ideological obscuration, exposing the conflict that has been suppressed; the devalued ‘other’ is made visible” (ibid.). While we may be interested in the multiple meanings and interpretations to emerge through a deconstruction, it’s necessary to note that we can never assert that we’ve arrived at the “truth about what the author of a text intended to communicate” (ibid., 342). Therefore, we do not focus on intent. Rather, it’s the meaning and impression of the storytelling site that hold our attention.

Deconstruction strategies: the congressman’s letter

The first analytic strategy in a deconstruction, according to Martin’s process, is “dismantling a dichotomy, exposing it as a false distinction” (ibid., 355). By dismantling a dichotomy, we are in fact complicating the story and situation under review. The first dichotomy embedded in the congressman’s letter (see Appendix for a transcribed draft of the letter) to his female aide centers on two men. While the congressman describes the aide as “a complete partner” to him she has chosen another man romantically who may be the “one.” The figures of these men in opposition to each other, with the congressman representing himself as profoundly smitten with the aide and views her as “a complete partner,” in contrast to her boyfriend, “who might get to be
your partner for more of your life,” loom large as competing options for the aide’s affection. The false distinction here is that the congressman poses himself as a romantic option for the aide even though she does not view him that way, according to news reports. The congressman has injected himself into her romantic life because of feelings of attraction that are not mutual.

Martin also instructs us to pay attention to the element “most alien” to the text (ibid., 348). It’s worth noting that the entire tone of the letter, written by a married congressman to an aide that he has a clear infatuation with, is “alien” to what decorum considers to be an appropriate and professional communication. There is no phrase that better encapsulates the “most alien” nature of this text than his closing line of the letter, where he signs off with the flourish, “with all my heart, Patrick.” The congressman is apparently a religious man, since he mentions God twice in the letter, including his wish that himself and his aide “discover our paths through His light.” While the reference to God in a letter written by a boss to his subordinate is also a “most alien” element to the text, perhaps the aide was also religious and the congressional office participated in prayer meetings or Bible studies or worship circles. We do not know. Yet the congressman’s sign-off is perhaps even more “alien” than the reference to God in the letter because it solidified his romantic interest in his aide, and while reference to God may be out of place in the workspace, and certainly grounds for complaints depending on the belief systems of those involved, the sign-off “with all my heart” can never be normalized in a work environment, especially since the Republican is married, and as a religious person he should no doubt know that expressions of infidelity are problematic.

Moving on, another analytic strategy instructs us to unpack metaphors in deconstruction work. To do this, we need to visit a reference to the Vietnam War Memorial. In the letter, the congressman references his presence at the memorial as a place for personal reflection. He writes that the Vietnam War is “the war I grew up with,” prompting readers to unpack the metaphor of war in this missive. In a letter that is dripping in affection for his aide, it’s hard not to call forth the cliché that “all’s fair in love and war.” While the congressman referred to the Vietnam War Memorial as a site of contemplation, he ventures into a description of death, of people with shared last names, whose life paths were cut short. The war allusion can either indicate that his romantic feelings to the aide will be cut short as well, or perhaps he’s willing to fight for her affection since, as he writes in the letter, “as we travel our paths together, I am comforted that there is more unwritten.” The allusion to war in a letter centering on love demonstrates the significance of his emotions, the risks he is willing to take and has already taken, and the dangers in recklessness when certain men don’t get what they want.

Another storytelling deconstruction strategy focuses on textual double entendres “that may point to an unconscious subtext, often sexual in content” (Martin, 1990, 355). We can point to a relevant subtext at the start of the letter, when the congressman describes the aide’s boyfriend as “a very, very lucky man who might get to be your partner for more of your life.” Since the aide and congressman have not been physically intimate with each other – although the congressman did tell reporters that they did once share a hug “maybe longer . . . than needed to be” (Taylor, 2017) – the reference that the boyfriend can be involved “for more of your life” points to sex. Since the congressman/aide relationship lacked physical intimacy (with him telling a National Public Radio (NPR) affiliate that he “never touched her,” although “it was something that, from time to time, I struggled with” (ibid.)), the “more” insinuates a sexual element that his relationship to the aide lacks. This subtext is compounded by a line later in the same paragraph, where the congressman writes, “I pray that you might be blessed with children that you will raise so wonderfully in your image.” Therefore, the “very, very lucky man” who gets to be involved in “more of your life” may also be the man whose sexual union results in children raised “so wonderfully in your image.”
A congressman fixated on his aide

Ultimately, Martin instructs those engaged in this reconstruction to “explain the persistence of the status quo” (Martin, 1990, 355), which in this instance is an older male congressman, age 62 at the time of his scandal, who has emotionally attached himself to a younger female subordinate, so much so that he draws upon his own life narrative – including a belief that God sets forth a path for him to follow, and a historical backdrop of growing up in the shadow of the Vietnam War – to press upon her that their life paths are entwined “together” and that their future is “unwritten,” even if she has chosen “the one” who is not the congressman.

The 1959 foundational text, *Studies in Social Power*, offers a multitude of definitions of power that remain relevant to the power structures at play in the Meehan scandal. For instance, “Power may be defined as the capacity of the individual, or group of individuals, to modify the conduct of other individuals or groups in the manner which he desires” (Cartwright, 1959, 186). And there is also the elegantly phrased, “Power may be defined as the production of intended effects” (ibid.). Through the congressman’s letter it becomes evident that he cannot release his affections, which are sexual harassing, for his aide. Because Meehan and the aide’s relationship did not extend into a physical exchange, Meehan views their interactions as pure and innocent. When the aide rejects Meehan’s claims of affection, his sense of power to control their relationship is diminished. It no longer produces his “intended effects.” And while their futures “together” may remain “unwritten,” as expressed in his letter, it’s clear that his political career is over.

What demands further study is an in-depth analysis that compares political fallout among two distinct eras of political sex scandals: those occurring before fall 2017 with the inception of the #MeToo movement, and those occurring since then. We know from previous research (Mandell, 2017a) that male politicians caught in sexual harassment scandals in the workplace can and do face political failure. Yet in a #MeToo era, how does that failure differ? Does it occur more swiftly? Is public opinion less divided and more on the “side” of the female target? Or does partisan politics remain the most important element in predicting the political futures of sexually harassing politicians? These questions demand attention in our democracy, lest mistrust of our elected officials, and the way they treat women in public service, continues to erode further.

Appendix

Letter from Congressman Patrick Meehan to his aide, an unidentified woman (Tamari, 2018):

May 4, 2017

As you bask in this moment of extreme joy I want to share with you my sentiment of how richly it is deserved. You are kind and sensitive and caring and infectious with your laugh. You are and have been a complete partner to me and you have brought me much happiness. It is a very, very lucky man who might get to be your partner for more of your life. If this is indeed “the one,” I hope you will find great contentment. I pray that you might be blessed with children that you will raise so wonderfully in your image.

As I walked this evening and glanced over at the White House I smiled at the irony that on a day that I had to say “no” to the president and to the speaker of the House, I got to say “yes” to you. I hope that the former will be judged as a vote of conscience and the latter as an expression of care.

There is a funny saying that “man plans and God laughs.” I hope that we each discover our paths through His light. From time to time, when I need perspective, I will sit quietly in the embrace of the Vietnam memorial, the war I grew up with. I found surprisingly close together
the names of [redacted] from Montana and [redacted] from Pa. As I traced the names with my finger, I wondered who they were and why their plans ended so sadly and abruptly. As we travel our paths together, I am comforted that there is more unwritten.

Thank you for all that you have done for me, and for all you continue to do. I thank God for putting you into my life and for all that we have seen, and experienced [illegible] shared together. With all my heart,

Patrick

Notes

1 See for example, in recent years alone, the scandals of former Louisiana Senator David Vitter in 2007; Idaho Senator Larry Craig in 2007; former New York Governor Eliot Spitzer in 2008; former South Carolina Governor Mark Sanford in 2009; and former New York Congressman Anthony Weiner’s scandals from 2011 to 2016.

2 I use gendered pronouns intentionally.

References


