The routledge companion to media and scandal

Howard Tumber, Silvio Waisbord

Scandal, media effects and political candidates

Publication details

Clarisse Warren, Dona-Gene Barton
Published online on: 17 Apr 2019

How to cite :- Clarisse Warren, Dona-Gene Barton. 17 Apr 2019, Scandal, media effects and political candidates from: The routledge companion to media and scandal Routledge
Accessed on: 26 Sep 2023

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR DOCUMENT

Full terms and conditions of use: https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/legal-notices/terms

This Document PDF may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproductions, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The publisher shall not be liable for an loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.
Public and media fixation on political scandals is not new, and yet the rise of candidate-centered campaigns, the evolution of journalistic norms, and rapid changes in today’s media environment have intensified the media’s spotlight on the moral mishaps of politicians (Allern et al. 2012; Sabato, Stencel, and Lichter 2000; Thompson 2000; Tumber 2004; Tumber and Waisbord 2004). Sabato, Stencel, and Lichter emphasize that “new technologies and competitive forces have turned the pressure cooker of daily news decisions into a microwave oven, especially when it comes to sensational and sensitive stories about the private lives of political figures” (2000, 34). These dynamics are amplified as journalists and the public struggle to keep up with what seems like a revolving door of scandals that are often initiated at the tweeting hands of politicians. Given the accelerated growth of scandal coverage, it is even more important to understand how media attention to the moral and at times legal line-crossing of political representatives impacts citizens’ evaluations and vote choices.

In this chapter, we provide an overview of existing knowledge as to how scandal coverage impacts the electoral fate of political candidates. Early research on scandal effects focused on documenting the negative, immediate, and varied electoral consequences faced by politicians linked to scandal. We begin by reviewing some of the most widely documented electoral effects associated with media attention to political scandals. Building on these important contributions, later research has offered more nuance to our understanding by investigating how various characteristics of the scandal, the candidate, the electoral context, and the media environment condition voters’ reactions to scandal coverage. We survey some of the prominent streams of research in these areas. Next, we examine scandal fatigue which can occur when the public becomes desensitized to ongoing scandal coverage. Finally, we conclude with a discussion of some areas where future research has the potential to enhance significantly our understanding of the intersection of scandal, media effects, and political candidates.

**Electoral effects of political scandal coverage**

Not only is media attention to a politician’s perceived or actual wrongdoings required to create a scandal (Gamson and Lowi 2003; Waisbord 2004), but there are serious consequences from voters and political elites that are well documented. On the voters’ side of the equation, candidate evaluations suffer (Doherty, Dowling, and Miller 2011; Funk 1996; Peters...
and Welch 1980; Welch and Hibbing 1997) and vote share is depressed (Abramowitz 1988; 1991; Basinger 2013; Brown 2006; Hendry, Jackson, and Mondak 2008; Praino, Stockemer, and Moscardelli 2013) following news linking a politician to scandalous behavior. In terms of candidate response, incumbents embroiled in scandal are more likely to retire strategically (Groseclose and Krehbiel 1994; Jacobson and Dimock 1994; Praino, Stockemer, and Moscardelli 2013; Swearingen and Jatkowski 2011) especially when they are high-profile targets of media coverage (Graffin et al. 2013). Political elites also play an important role in the aftermath of scandal. Much like sharks smelling fresh blood in the water, high-quality challengers are more likely to surface in the subsequent primary and general elections (Basinger 2013; Lazarus 2008) and, consequently, scandal-ridden incumbents are more likely to be defeated as early as the primaries (Praino, Stockemer, and Moscardelli 2013). Additionally, the hint of scandal can make campaign fund raising more difficult (Rottinghaus 2014). It should come as no surprise that potential donors and party elites are less willing to invest in a candidate who is perceived as high risk because of the shadow of scandal. Beyond the immediate effects of scandal, Praino and his colleagues (2013) critically show that there are lingering effects of scandal that can take multiple election cycles to dissipate entirely.

Contextualizing political scandal effects

As with any political phenomenon, context matters. Below, we review some of the major streams of research that have assessed how factors such as scandal type, candidate characteristics, electoral context, and media coverage characteristics influence the way voters react to politicians embroiled in scandal.

Scandal type

We begin by reviewing how the type of scandal conditions voter reactions. A great deal of research explores how voters react to specific types of scandal. Although there are some minor conceptual differences in the literature on how to categorize scandal types, below we discuss three broad categories: sex scandals, financial scandals, and corruption scandals.

Sex scandals. Tennessee politician and doctor Scott DeJarlais found himself in the middle of a sex scandal that rocked the pro-life, conservative U.S. Congressman’s 2014 reelection campaign and nearly cost him his House seat in a solidly Republican district. DeJarlais faced accusations that he forced his former wife to have two abortions, and attempted to persuade his mistress, who was also his patient, to have an abortion as well (Sullivan 2012). During an investigation launched by the Tennessee Board of Health, DeJarlais admitted under oath to having six extramarital affairs with three co-workers, two patients, and a drug representative (Carroll and Harrison 2012). He pled guilty and was fined (Carroll 2013). Despite running on a pro-life platform, DeJarlais was able to retain his seat in the House by winning his 2014 and 2016 elections. Although a tidal wave of negative press surfaced, DeJarlais weathered the storm. This case provides a unique glimpse into the world of sex scandals and their impact on political actors or, in examples like this one, the lack thereof.

It is often assumed that politicians who find themselves embroiled in a scandal will either retire, as did U.S. Congressmen Anthony Weiner (D-NY) (Barrett 2011) and Al Franken (D-MN) (Fandos 2017), or lose their election bid, as did U.S. Senate candidate Roy Moore (R-AL) (Yglesias 2017). Although cases of electoral demise following a sex scandal are common, there are plenty of examples, from that of DeJarlais in Tennessee to the high-profile case of U.S. President Bill Clinton, where voters are willing to forgive or overlook sexual indiscretions.
Electoral consequences often are less severe in the case of “moral” or sex scandals, compared to “financial” scandals (Carlson, Ganiel, and Hyde 2000; Doherty, Dowling, and Miller 2011; 2014; Funk 1996).

Sex scandals, unlike the other types of scandals mentioned in this chapter, are often not illegal. Rather, they are a violation of social norms that govern what is sexually acceptable within a society (Gamson and Lowi 2003; Thompson 2000). These norms may vary to some degree, but it is generally accepted that a married political actor is expected to remain faithful to his or her spouse. Additionally, sex scandals may include claims of sexual harassment, the distribution of provocative pictures, viewing pornography on state computers, soliciting prostitutes, and even in rare instances, serious accusations of child pornography or solicitation of a minor.

Sex scandals are also unique in the variability of public and candidate response. Some scandals spur outrage, while others get swept under the rug and forgotten. Research has shown that the public tends to have more tolerance for sex scandals when politicians blame the accusations on partisan tactics employed by the opposing party (Summers 2000). By claiming to be a victim of partisan rhetoric and dirty politics, politicians can more easily dismiss accusations of scandal. Even support for Bill Clinton following the Lewinsky affair has been attributed to reframing the scandal as a Republican political tactic that wasted taxpayer dollars (Miller 1999; Shah et al. 2002; Thompson 2000). When scandals cannot be framed as a partisan tactic to turn a private act into a public issue—wasting public time and resources in the process—they become tales of morality with deeper societal implications (Gamson 2001). It is this introduction of a societal morality-based narrative that facilitates public scorn against the transgressor. To complicate the situation further, Thompson (2000) explains that there are three elements that can take an already negative sex scandal and amplify public outcry. These are hypocrisy, potential conflicts of interest, and second-order transgressions, such as denial. Although these three elements are easily transferrable to the other types of scandal, they are especially useful in understanding how a private matter can demolish political careers.

Hypocrisy may manifest itself in many forms, but within the context of sex scandals, it is most likely to occur when a political actor professes to stand for traditional family values yet has an affair. Politically conservative candidates may suffer more severe consequences of a sex scandal while in office due to voter perceptions of hypocrisy (Basinger and Rottinghaus 2012; Rottinghaus 2014; Welch and Hibbing 1997). Rottinghaus (2014, 384) points out that rank and file members of the Republican Party, especially more conservative primary voters, are more critical of their potential nominee’s illegal or immoral actions because the voters and activists in the Republican Party are more conservative and adhere to more traditional values than other party members.

If a candidate’s involvement in a scandal is framed by the media as an example of hypocrisy, this can negatively affect a candidate’s reputation (Gamson and Lowi 2003).

The second element that amplifies the negative impact of sex scandals is potential for conflicts of interest. It is easier to recognize a conflict of interest when it comes to financial scandals or corruption scandals; however, sex scandals can provide political actors with the ability to favor their romantic interest at the expense of third parties. Sexual relationships can also lead to appointments, misuse of taxpayer funds, and even payoffs (Thompson 2000).

Finally, Thompson’s (2000) conceptualization of second-order transgressions (as any response except full disclosure) adds to the weight of the charges. Denial or only telling partial truths can lead to further degradation of the political actor’s reputation, and it often extends the amount
of news coverage a scandal attracts. If a political actor is caught lying—either by commission or omission—and new information slowly trickles out, then the negative effects of the scandal can last longer (Mitchell 2014). This suggests that if a candidate embroiled in a scandal—especially a sex scandal—has to eat crow, he or she would do well to eat it while it’s hot and to eat the whole thing.

A sex scandal need not end a political actor’s career. It is possible for politicians to survive scandal by choosing between two viable options. The first is to reframe the scandal in terms of partisan political tactics. If the other party is using this as a tactic to distract from bigger, more important issues or as a means to gain power, then the spotlight can be at least partially taken off the embroiled politician. The second option is that the politician can admit to the sexual indiscretion and fully disclose any other elements that could leak out and prolong the negative effects. Mitchell (2014) has demonstrated that scandal effects decay rapidly, especially when new details are not released. Vonnahme (2014) found that the decline of scandal effects over time is especially pronounced among candidate supporters. Thus, it may be advantageous for a scandal plagued politician to admit to the allegations and move forward. Reflecting on the case of DeJarlais, it is possible that, by admitting to his extramarital affairs and seeking forgiveness from his constituents, he could have avoided these second-order transgressions, thereby shortening the lifespan of the scandal and saving his career.

Financial scandals. Far less salacious but also prolific are financial scandals. Unlike sex scandals, financial scandals are more likely to involve breaking the law and constituents’ trust. Thompson characterizes financial scandals as the “illicit interlacing of money and power” (2000, 160). Money drives American politics, with the average cost of campaigning for a state-wide Senatorial seat in 2016 costing approximately $1.5 million, with variability by state (Kim 2016). Money and political power are inextricably intertwined, but it is not the mere interconnection of power and money that is the cause of concern. Instead financial scandals emerge when either money or power are used illegally to gain the other. Bribery, electoral corruption, misappropriation of funds, and the misuse of power for personal financial gain are some of the more prominent types of financial scandals (Thompson 2000).

U.S. Congresswoman Corrine Brown (D-FL) found herself in the middle of a financial scandal in relation to her non-profit, One Door for Education Foundation. This foundation’s stated intentions were to provide scholarships to underprivileged students, but allegedly served as a personal slush fund (Bohn 2016; Dearen and Anderson 2016). Despite Brown pleading not guilty to several counts of mail and wire fraud, concealing facts on financial disclosure forms, theft of government property, obstruction of the Internal Revenue Service laws, and filing false tax returns, she was convicted on 18 counts out of a 22-count federal indictment (Dwyer 2017). Despite being caught in a financial scandal, Brown, a 12-term incumbent, sought reelection in 2016, but lost in the Democratic primary.

Citizens are more willing to forgive political actors for moral indiscretions as opposed to financial scandals (Carlson, Ganiel, and Hyde 2000; Doherty, Dowling, and Miller 2011; 2014; Funk 1996). As Sabato and his colleagues state, “The public and the press are far more comfortable rummaging through a candidate’s checkbook than his or her bedsheets or liquor cabinet” (2000, 4). In accounting for which type of scandal is worse (financial or sex scandals), Doherty, Dowling, and Miller (2011) examined the impact of abuse of power on scandal effects through an experiment that measures response to sex scandals and financial scandals with and without an apparent abuse of power. With no apparent abuse of power, they find that individuals involved in financial scandal are judged more harshly when considering vote choice and job evaluation; however, sex scandals promote a more negative judgment on personal evaluations. When there is an obvious abuse of power, these negative judgments are amplified such that financial scandals
Scandal and political candidates

with abuse of power have the most negative effect on personal evaluations, followed by job evaluations, and vote intent (Doherty, Dowling and Miller 2011). When abuse of power is present, financial scandals can be especially damaging to political careers.

In Brown’s case, there was a clear abuse of power. Additionally, two of the three elements that amplify public reaction to scandal were present: conflicts of interest and the second-order transgression of denial (Thompson 2000). These factors may explain why she did not survive a bid for reelection, like many politicians involved in financial scandals. Financial scandals are typically accompanied by legal ramifications, which makes individuals less likely to admit their involvement. For political candidates involved in a financial scandal, there are usually no favorable outcomes, which provides them with only two options: retire or face likely defeat at the ballot box.

Corruption scandals. The third and final type of scandal highlighted in this chapter is corruption scandal. Although corruption scandals often involve money, they are different from financial scandals in their use of power. Watergate and the Iran-Contra scandals have been marked in history as the quintessential corruption scandals, as they shed light on previously undisclosed hidden forms of power that had been concealed to the public (Thompson 2000). It is important to understand that political scandals often conflate the phenomenon of the act of corruption with its effects of subverting the public interest for personal or private gain. It is this public interest dimension that is unique to corruption scandals, as these violate the public norms of those in power (Philp 1997).

Corruption scandals blur the lines between what is politically proper and what is improper. They may include nepotism, cronyism, extortion, bribery, trading in influence, and embezzlement (Thompson 2000). Similar to financial scandals, corruption scandals are also more prone to illegal activities than are sex scandals. Corruption scandals can involve money, but they do not have to involve financial impropriety. Corruption scandals are often more difficult to spot, as it is more difficult to provide evidence of impropriety (Philp 1997; Thompson 2000).

A particularly extreme case of political corruption scandal is that of former Democratic Governor of Illinois, Rob Blagojevich. In 2011, Blagojevich was impeached and later convicted of 17 charges which included wire fraud, attempted extortion, and conspiracy to solicit bribes (Long and Pearson 2009). The Blagojevich case involved allegations that he engaged in pay to play and influence peddling for Barack Obama’s Senate seat following the 2008 presidential election (Coen, Pearson, and Kidwell 2008). As Governor of Illinois, Blagojevich was responsible for appointing Obama’s Senate replacement and solicited bribes for this appointment (Justice Department Briefing on Blagojevich Investigation 2008). The Blagojevich case shows just how intertwined money and power can become. This case also demonstrates that corruption scandals involve more than just financial impropriety. They involve an abuse of power. As Governor, Blagojevich was within his duties and responsibilities to appoint a replacement for a vacant Senate seat, choosing someone he favored would not constitute corruption. However, by asking aspiring politicians to pay for the chance to be appointed he engaged in corruption.

When scandal involves an abuse of power, a less-informed electorate may lack the knowledge necessary to hold a corrupt politician accountable (Klašnja 2017). Citizens with greater political knowledge are more likely to understand the charges of corruption and should therefore be more willing to hold the politician accountable for his or her bad behavior. Klašnja (2017) finds that political knowledge does promote citizens’ desires to hold a corrupt politician accountable, but partisanship mitigates this difference, as strong partisans are more politically knowledgeable and are therefore motivated to endorse their co-partisans despite corruption. In addition to voter characteristics, media coverage can moderate the impact of corruption scandals. Ferraz and Finan (2008) provide evidence that media coverage of government corruption
can enhance voter accountability. Research also suggests that public reaction to political corruption is especially impacted when there is extensive media coverage and there is evidence that the corruption charges are founded (Costas-Pérez, Solé-Ollé, and Sorribas-Navarro 2012).

Candidate characteristics

In addition to the type of infraction, candidate characteristics can also amplify or dampen the effects of scandal. Given the rise of candidate-centered campaigns it should come as no surprise that who is the subject of political scandal and how that individual responds matters greatly for public reaction. For example, both Bill Clinton and John Edwards faced allegations of sexual impropriety during U.S. presidential bids and yet Clinton survived largely unscathed whereas Edwards’s political ambitions were quickly extinguished. Not only were Clinton and Edwards different people with different personalities and traits but they also responded differently to the scandal allegations.

Empirical efforts to understand better how candidate demographics such as gender and race moderate the effects of scandal have been limited (Barnes, Beaulieu, and Saxton 2018; Berinsky et al. 2011; Schwindt-Bayer, Esarey, and Schumacher 2018; Smith, Smith Powers, and Suarez 2005; Żemojtel-Piotrowska et al. 2017). Conversely, scholars have paid relatively more attention to the role of candidate messages and response to allegations of scandal. Although candidates may not be able to control the release of scandal information, very much within their control is how to respond to scandal. Candidate response strategy can play a powerful role in shaping public reactions. As previously mentioned, any response other than full disclosure and accepting responsibility can backfire on a candidate. By quickly repenting of their missteps, candidates not only provide themselves with the emotional equity necessary to rebuild the trust of their constituents, they also remove potential ammunition from opponents. Although candidates cannot often change their characteristics and traits, it is possible to use these traits to overcome scandal. If a candidate involved in scandal can tailor a message that resonates with the voters and have a genuine connection to the voters, it is possible for them to rebuild the voters’ trust (Smith, Barth, and Nir 2013). Additionally, incumbents can attempt to focus media attention on substantive issues that play to their established strengths (Bianco 1994; Druckman, Kifer, and Parkin 2009).

Electoral context

Electoral success following scandal is highly context dependent. Although the characteristics of a candidate play a role, we would be negligent to ignore the electoral characteristics that moderate the effects of scandal. Perhaps one of the most obvious electoral characteristics is incumbency. Is the scandal-clad candidate a challenger or an incumbent? Although many scholars contend that scandal most often compels incumbents to retire by dissuading them from seeking reelection (Alford et al. 1994; Kiewiet and Zeng 1993; Grossclose and Krehbiel 1994), others suggest that scandal is becoming less disqualifying than ever before (Smith, Barth, and Nir 2013). Being politically stymied by scandal makes retirement an attractive option. However, it is important to recognize that scandal survival is quite common (Basinger 2013; Peters and Welch 1980; Welch and Hibbing 1997) and if there are no viable challengers, an incumbent involved in a scandal may still win reelection based on the lack of a qualified challenger and the numerous incumbency advantages.

Conversely, if scandal erupts during a challenger’s campaign, the outcome is far different than that of an incumbent. Challengers are especially sensitive to vulnerabilities that result
Scandal and political candidates

from implications of scandal (Krasno and Green 2008). Often challengers have yet to build up emotional equity with their voting base, so constituents are less likely to forget and forgive. Challengers have an uphill battle when attempting to overtake an incumbent, with the many advantages of name recognition and past experience. Not surprisingly, few studies have examined how challengers involved in scandal fare politically, so little is known regarding this dynamic. It isn’t that challengers do not have scandals that rock their campaigns. Rather, their campaigns simply matter less in the grand scheme of things because they are not generally breaking the trust of constituents—they are simply not building trust.

Rottinghaus (2014) suggests that, in addition to incumbency, there are institutional, political, and economic factors that can ameliorate or deteriorate the negative consequences of political scandal. One such factor is the type of office held by the individual involved. Rottinghaus examines scandal at the executive branch and finds that presidents and their staff are more likely to survive a scandal when there are more partisans in the legislature but are less likely to survive when there is greater overall political opposition among Congress and the public. Interestingly, these results do not hold for state level executives, suggesting that federal office holders are less susceptible to scandal effects than lower-level politicians. Although the political environment shapes the duration of an executive scandal, economic growth and public approval appear to have no effect on surviving a scandal at either the national or state level (Rottinghaus 2014). The partisan composition of a candidate’s district is also important given the well documented finding that voters are less affected by scandals committed by a candidate who is a fellow partisan (e.g. Cortina and Rottinghaus 2017; Peterson and Vonnahme 2014).

Media coverage characteristics

Given the critical role media play in disseminating scandal information, not only is the study of scandal effects, the study of media effects (Gamson and Lowi 2003; Waisbord 2004) but important research has looked explicitly at how characteristics of media coverage influence the effects of scandal information. For instance, media framing of scandal can have implications for how voters evaluate political candidates. Owen (2000) argues that an entertainment news frame can explain the bifurcated evaluations that voters held of U.S. President Bill Clinton who maintained higher personal evaluations compared to his job approval ratings that were more susceptible to the scandal coverage. Also, some argue that the Clinton campaign’s framing of scandal coverage as a partisan witch-hunt contributed to Clinton’s ability to survive electorally (Shah et al. 2002).

Additionally, the sheer quantity of scandal coverage is important. As Waisbord articulates, “Media coverage is the barometer that indicates the existence (or absence) of a scandal. If splashed in headlines, scandals seem present and relevant; if buried inside or ignored, scandals may be considered over” (2004, 1079). When the media’s spotlight on scandal is strengthened, the electoral paths of implicated politicians can be more constrained. For instance, politicians involved in scandal who received more intense media scrutiny were more likely to retire strategically (Garz and Sörensen 2017; Graffin et al. 2013). Conversely, the lack of media attention can contribute to a politician’s ability to escape an electoral boot from office. Adding to a host of advantages incumbents have each election cycle, Fogarty (2013) found that in non-competitive districts, scandal coverage in local papers was almost nonexistent.

Besides coverage amount, the timing of scandal coverage can significantly impact electoral fortunes. Political candidates attempt to avoid a dreaded October surprise when a scandal breaks the month before Election Day leaving insufficient time for the candidate to rebound. Mitchell (2014) provides evidence from the 2006 U.S. House races that late breaking scandals were the
most devastating for voter support levels and early breaking scandals that received media attention prior to September had voter support levels that were indistinguishable from candidates in scandal-free districts. Garz and his colleagues (2017) show that German newspapers may strategically wait until closer to Election Day to release news stories of a political candidate’s involvement in scandal in order to maximize the impact of the salacious reports. Similarly, Doherty and his colleagues (2014) find that in the case of moral scandals, more recent indiscretions were more severely punished by voters than those occurring in the more distant past.

Critically, the rise of social media has opened the floodgates (see Williams and Delli Carpini 2004 for a broader discussion) when it comes to the way citizens and new media platforms can influence the electoral impacts of political scandals. Whereas news outlets were once the source for breaking scandal information, scandal is now often propagated by digital media and traditional mass media functioning in tandem (Chadwick 2011). Even when scandal first erupts online, it is the amount of coverage given by the mass media that gives the story legitimacy (Toepfl 2011). With fewer official gatekeepers of political information, citizens now have the ability to do a great deal of damage to political actors’ credibility and reputation by advancing specific narratives and political frames surrounding the scandal (Chadwick 2011).

**Scandal fatigue and the absence of media effects**

As the media’s coverage of political scandal drones on, one possible response or nonresponse from the public is “scandal fatigue.” Drawing on Keith Tester’s (1994) theories pertaining to the desensitization of media audiences, Waisbord (2004, 1091) writes that “the media do not motivate people to act; instead, it has an anesthetic effect. The result is scandal fatigue, a permanent sense of déjà vu among overstimulated and bored audiences inattentive to new images of suffering.” Thompson (2000, 117) similarly observes that

> the cycle of scandal gives to a kind of weariness, a kind of “scandal fatigue”, on the part of many people. New scandals appear with predictable frequency, but gradually they lose their novelty value and even, in some respects, their capacity to shock and surprise, as readers and viewers become increasingly inured to the spectacle.

These words have never been truer than today. When the public is or eventually becomes unaffected by scandal coverage one reason for this could be scandal fatigue. If scandal becomes normalized to the point that moral missteps and corruption charges are expected of political candidates, then the public can become desensitized or immune to breaking news of yet another politician embroiled in yet another scandal. If scandal coverage fails to present details that are new or deviate from what is known or expected of politicians, then continued scandal coverage may have diminished effects (Mitchell 2014).

A few studies including Thompson’s (2000) and Waisbord’s (2004) own have been at the forefront of empirically documenting the effects of scandal fatigue. Kumlin and Esaiasson (2012) argue that as scandals become more prevalent there should be observable differences in the electorate’s reactions due to scandal fatigue. Using Eurobarometer data, they show that in the past scandals negatively affected satisfaction with democracy measures but as scandals became a more permanent feature of the election cycle these negative effects diminished. Mitchell (2014) provides additional evidence that repeated scandal coverage eventually produces diminished effects. In a series of panel experiments, she shows that voters have what she terms a “saturation threshold” after which repeated scandal coverage fails to affect candidate evaluations. Although initial news that a political candidate is linked to scandal lowered
candidate evaluations, after individuals incorporated this information into their impressions, subsequent coverage of scandal involvement failed to lower further candidate evaluations. A notable exception to this pattern of results emerged when subsequent coverage revealed new details of the scandal. In such cases ongoing coverage did extend the lifespan of the scandal and the ability of the coverage to lower candidate evaluations.

Media attention to political scandals resembles a revolving door where old skeletons in the closet are continuously being pushed aside by new dirt that gives renewed life to a stagnant scandal. The growth of cable news and the new media environment have produced a pace of scandal reporting unmatched by prior news cycles. Consequently, the question is not if but rather when and under what conditions will scandal fatigue occur. Given the importance of this phenomenon, this is an underdeveloped area of research awaiting further study. Given the increased attention to political scandals in today’s media environment, greater understanding is needed of the conditions and factors that lead the public to become desensitized to scandal coverage. More research is needed to assess how the nature of the scandal coverage conditions the likelihood of public fatigue. Apart from the number of scandals and the duration of coverage, it is possible that certain types of coverage are more likely to lead to desensitization. Also, it would be helpful to understand better which types of individuals are more prone to scandal fatigue and if certain electoral contexts are more conducive to exhausting the electorate. These are just a few of the areas that could benefit from further study.

**Future directions in political scandal research**

For some politicians, scandal coverage equals the kiss of electoral death. And yet for others, breaking news of scandal may have initial effects and yet not be fatal. Thanks to a growing body of literature on political scandals, we now have a more nuanced understanding of a wide range of factors that can alleviate or accelerate the negative consequences of being linked to scandal. Despite advances in our knowledge of scandal effects, there remain significant gaps in the empirical record that await future scholarly exploration. Throughout this chapter we have discussed areas where additional research is needed. This is important not only to provide new understanding but to test the generalizability of existing findings in various electoral, cultural, and national contexts. Before finishing we offer a brief discussion of some additional research areas and questions where further investigation could illuminate our understanding of the intersection of scandal, media effects, and political candidates.

The rapid changes in today’s media environment have produced a pace of scandal coverage never seen before. We still know relatively little about how voters react when they are constantly bombarded by scandal coverage. When and under what conditions does the most recent news story displace an old scandal story? How do voters react when a politician is involved in multiple scandals that unfold over time? How does increased media choice influence the magnitude of scandal effects and how do those effects differ based on individual differences such as partisanship? For instance, are voters able to lessen the impact of scandal coverage of a fellow partisan simply by avoiding news that raises allegations against their candidate? Or is there a point where voters are unable to deny the severity of the charges even if it is against their preferred candidate? Also, given the increasing ability of political candidates to launch successful comebacks from scandal, greater understanding is needed of the conditions that facilitate the likelihood of a successful rebound. How do candidate characteristics, scandal type, and electoral context contribute to a successful comeback story? Are certain candidates because of their charisma and popularity levels more likely to be accepted back into the political fold? Are there certain scandals that the public are more willing to forgive after enough time has elapsed?
There is also an opportunity to expand our understanding of how media coverage of scandals at different levels of office (e.g. federal vs. state vs. local) and across different types of political office (e.g. executives vs. legislators vs. bureaucrats) influence voter reaction. For instance, does scandal information matter more in low-information elections? Do certain types of scandal carry greater weight for certain political offices? Political scandal research is even more essential amidst the rapid changing media environment at a time when political polarization and claims of misinformation as a standard political strategy are on the rise. Research over the past two decades has significantly advanced our understanding of the dynamic intersection of these changes and we anticipate that a host of new studies will explore these yet unanswered questions in the field along with many others to shape a new generation of scholarly knowledge.

References


Scandal and political candidates


Clarisse Warren and Dona-Gene Barton


