Surviving Scandal: An Exploration of the Immediate and Lasting Effects of Scandal on Candidate Evaluation*

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Objective.  This study explores the immediate and long-term effects of scandal on candidate evaluation. Because scandals involve politicians behaving in ways inconsistent with prevailing moral standards, an immediate negative reaction to such information is largely unavoidable. However, the present study examines whether there are any long-term effects of scandal.  Methods.  Results from a longitudinal experiment are presented. The nature of the design facilitated the exploration of the immediate and lasting effects of exposure to scandal and the consistency of these effects across individuals.  Results.  Exposure to scandalous information about a candidate had an immediate negative effect on evaluation, but the magnitude of this negative effect declined over time, especially among the candidate's supporters. Conclusion.  This research suggests that understanding the effects of scandal requires distinguishing between immediate and long-term effects.

To political observers, political scandals appear abundant in American politics. Over the last few years, a number of members of the U.S. Congress have resigned amid allegations of sexual misconduct (e.g., Representative Anthony Weiner [NY] resigned after inappropriate photographs surfaced along with revelations of inappropriate online relationships). Accusations of

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1Many recent studies of scandal rely on Thompson’s (2000) definition of scandal. Thompson emphasizes five characteristics for behavior to constitute a scandal: (1) the behavior violates values, norms, or morals; (2) there is an element of secrecy; (3) public or elite disapproval occurs; (4) there is public condemnation of the behavior; and (5) there are potential reputation repercussions. This definition has spurred debates regarding the extent to which the public and elites must condemn the act for it to be worthy of the scandal label (Nyhan, forthcoming). Other researchers (Entman, 2012) emphasize the role the media plays in moving malfeasance to the realm of political scandals. With these debates in mind, the term scandal is used here to mean any publicized incident by a politician that is inconsistent with prevailing moral standards, such as sexual infidelity or financial improprieties.


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sexual misconduct also plagued candidates in the 2012 elections. Presidential hopeful Herman Cain withdrew from the Republican nomination due to mounting allegations of sexual harassment. Yet, other political scandals have been unable to fell their culprits. Louisiana Senator David Vitter’s phone number was included on the D. C. Madam’s client list in 2007, but Vitter resisted political pressure to resign and won reelection in 2010.

The inconsistent reaction of the public to these incidents, and others, serves as a potent reminder of the importance of studying individual-level reaction to scandal. As a result, an extensive literature on scandal has evolved, including studies using survey data to examine particular scandalous incidents and experimental studies assessing the effect of scandal on the evaluation of hypothetical candidates. In general, this research finds that scandal involvement negatively affects the public’s evaluation of political actors. However, this research does not distinguish between the immediate effects of scandal involvement and any lasting effects on political actors. The present study addresses this gap with a longitudinal experiment exposing participants to scandalous information in the context of a fictitious political campaign. Exposure to scandalous information had an immediate negative effect on candidate evaluation; however, this effect diminished over time, particularly among the candidate’s supporters. Specifically, the candidate’s supporters returned to their prescandal affect toward the candidate after an initial negative reaction.

Immediate and Lasting Effects of Scandal

Given the propensity of political actors to engage in scandal, political scientists have not been reluctant to study the effect that scandalous information can have on political candidates and public officials. This body of research explores the effect of scandal on trait assessment (Funk, 1996), candidate evaluation (Carlson, Ganiel, and Hyde, 2000; Doherty, Dowling, and Miller, 2011; Fischle, 2000; Goren, 2002; Newman, 2002; Shah et al., 2002; Stoker, 1993; Zaller, 1998), and reelection (Abramowitz, 2001; Alford et al., 1994; Brown, 2006; Dimock and Jacobson, 1995; Jacobson and Dimock, 1994).

A number of studies address the effect of specific scandalous incidents (e.g., the Lewinsky scandal) on the approval ratings and electoral fortunes of political actors. For example, Jacobson and Dimock (1994, 1995) find that representatives involved in the 1992 House banking scandal were less likely to return to Congress because of retirement and electoral defeat. Still other studies rely on laboratory experiments to isolate the effect of scandal from the larger political environment. Funk finds that participants in her study offered
negative assessments of a hypothetical officeholder accused of either marital infidelity or financial improprieties.

Despite this variation in methodology, researchers generally find a strong negative connection between exposure to scandalous information and assessments of political actors. Why does scandal involvement produce this negative effect? A vast literature in psychology demonstrates a tendency for negative information to have a more powerful effect on decision making than nonnegative information (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, and Finkenauer, 2001; Fiske, 1980; Hamilton and Huffman, 1971). Individuals operate in a generally positive world and negative information helps distinguish others. We expect others to behave in socially desirable ways. Thus, undesirable information is less common and provides greater insight into a person’s character than neutral or positive information (Pratto and John, 1991).

Scandalous information about a candidate indicates that the candidate has violated norms of appropriate behavior. Such information about a candidate is particularly meaningful given the generally positive expectations we have of others. Further, political candidates work very hard to maintain positive public images; thus, scandalous behavior tends to be uncommon. While some politicians are forced to resign or end their political aspirations after disclosure of scandal involvement, most are not. Hence, scandal involvement distinguishes the scandal-ridden candidate from other political candidates and should produce an immediate negative reaction from observers. Hypothesis 1 follows from this discussion:

**H1**: Exposure to scandalous information about a candidate will have an immediate negative effect on candidate evaluation.

Though the effect of scandalous information is generally thought to be negative, political predispositions may moderate reaction to scandalous information. In particular, partisanship, political sophistication, and prior affect have all been found to mitigate the negative effect of scandal on assessments of political actors (Dimock and Jacobson, 1995; Fischle, 2000; Funk, 1996; Goren, 2002; Stoker, 1993). To illustrate, Dimock and Jacobson (1995) discover that partisanship influenced reactions to the 1992 House banking scandal in that fellow partisans were more inclined to favor the incumbent in assessing involvement in the scandal.

This nonuniform effect of scandal is often characterized as an instance of motivated reasoning (Fischle, 2000; Goren, 2002). The motivated reasoning perspective argues that individuals maintain running tallies of affect for politicians. These tallies (or prior affect) are updated with new information, but the processing of incoming information is also contingent on prior affect (Klein and Kunda, 1992; Kruglanski and Freund, 1983; Kunda, 1987, 1990; Pyszczynski and Greenberg, 1987; Sorrentino and Higgins, 1986). Specifically, individuals are motivated to maintain the direction of their prior impressions, leading individuals to offer a biased assessment of incoming information. Therefore, predispositions are argued to bias reaction to scandalous
information. Survey research provides support for this contention. Fischle (2000) finds that individuals adjusted the weight attached to the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal to ensure that postscandal evaluations of Clinton closely matched prescandal feelings toward the president.

Consistent with the motivated reasoning perspective, a candidate’s critics should react most negatively to scandal involvement, while a candidate’s supporters should dismiss the scandalous information in order to maintain their positive affect for the candidate. Thus, prior affect will moderate the negative effect of scandal on candidate evaluation such that:

**H2a**: The immediate effect of scandal on candidate evaluation will be greater among detractors of the candidate than among supporters.

Alternatively, the effect of scandal on candidate evaluation may be greater among supporters of the candidate than among a candidate’s detractors. Research on information processing suggests that individuals continuously update their tallies of affect for political candidates. For individuals initially disliking a candidate, any additional piece of negative information is unlikely to greatly shift their tally and thereby reduce their evaluation of the candidate. In contrast, the prior affect or tally maintained by supporters of a candidate will be overly positive. Given the negativity bias, the scandalous incident should have a larger negative effect than a positive or neutral piece of information. In essence, opponents of a candidate may have little room to downgrade their evaluation of the candidate, whereas affect has substantial room to plummet among supporters after scandal involvement. This discussion leads to an alternative hypothesis:

**H2b**: The immediate effect of scandal will be greater among supporters of the candidate than among detractors.

While this alternative hypothesis appears inconsistent with a motivated reasoning perspective, the two perspectives can be reconciled by considering the long-term effects of scandal.

As this review suggests, the effect of scandalous information is generally thought to be negative; however, the extent to which this negative effect persists over time is uncertain. This uncertainty exists, in part, because prior work on scandal relies on laboratory experiments or survey designs that make it difficult to distinguish the immediate effects of scandal from any long-term effects. The research design used in this study makes it possible to go beyond the immediate effect of a scandal to consider any lasting effects.

A heretofore unexplored possibility is that the negative effects of scandal may diminish over time for some individuals and not others. Consistent with a
motivated reasoning perspective, prior affect for the candidate may condition the extent to which scandal involvement has a lasting impression on candidate evaluation. In particular, supporters of a candidate may quickly return to their positive impression of the candidate after the initial shock over his scandal involvement has receded. In contrast, detractors will lack the motivation to improve their disposition toward the candidate and will continue to maintain their negative attitude over time. This suggests a final hypothesis:

**H3**: Attitudes toward a scandal-ridden candidate will rebound to a much greater extent among supporters than among detractors.

**Method**

A longitudinal experimental design was used to explore the immediate and lasting effects of scandal on candidate evaluation. This type of design affords control over information exposure. Without control over information exposure, any differences in evaluation attributed to scandalous information may actually be due to differential exposure to scandalous information. Most importantly, a longitudinal design enables one to isolate the immediate effect of scandalous information from any lasting effects.

**Participants**

Participants \( n = 362; \text{mean age} = 20 \text{ years; percent female} = 59; \text{Caucasian} = 35 \text{ percent, African American} = 14 \text{ percent, Asian American} = 22 \text{ percent, and Latino} = 24 \text{ percent} \) were recruited from an undergraduate political science course taught in three sections at a large southern university in the United States.\(^6\) Participants did not significantly vary by gender \( (\chi^2(3) = 3.16, p = 0.37) \), race \( (\chi^2(3) = 1.35, p = 0.72) \), age \( (F_{19,361} = 0.92, p = 0.56) \), social class \( (F_{3,361} = 0.93, p = 0.43) \), political knowledge \( (F_{12,357} = 1.16, p = 0.31) \), or ideology \( (F_{6,358} = 0.86, p = 0.52) \) according to their assignment to the experimental conditions.

**Design and Procedures**

The longitudinal experiment used in this study combined two in-person sessions (introductory and debriefing) with experimental sessions conducted

\(^6\)While the use of college students can be limiting, hypotheses related to candidate evaluation should be testable using a population of young adults.
over the Internet through a website designed for the study. After the initial introductory session, experimental sessions were conducted over a two-week period with an in-person debriefing session after all participants had completed the study.

**Introductory Session.** During the in-person introductory session, participants were given details about the study and asked to register on the website. For their participation, they were entered into a $500 drawing.

**Experimental Sessions.** After registering on the website, participants completed a prestimulus questionnaire inquiring about demographic characteristics (race, sex, age, and social class), political attitudes (policy positions, partisanship, and ideology), and political knowledge.

One day after completing the questionnaire, participants returned to the website to complete Stage 1. During Stages 1–5, participants read a series of articles from an online newspaper featuring a nonpartisan mayoral candidate. Each article detailed the candidate’s position on an issue and then provided specific details concerning the candidate’s position on two policies related to the issue (please see the Supporting Information for an example). Additionally, participants were given background information about the candidate when relevant to the story (e.g., he is a lawyer, he is currently in the California Assembly, etc.). After each stage, participants were asked to indicate their feelings toward the candidate on a five-point scale ranging from very negative to very positive.

Two days after completing Stage 1, participants received an e-mail asking them to return to the website for Stage 2 of the experiment. Stage 2 presented the second article. This process continued until participants completed Stage 5 (this stage presented the final article). After reading the final article (domestic partnership in all conditions), participants were asked to return to the website to complete a final questionnaire with questions tapping memory for the information presented in the campaign materials and candidate evaluation.

Participants were randomly assigned to one of four experimental conditions varying the presence of the scandal (scandal vs. no scandal) and the ideology of the hypothetical candidate (liberal vs. conservative). In the two conditions

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7To mitigate a common criticism of web-based experiments and surveys—control over the sample—participants provided identifying information during the introductory session and then supplied this information to begin the web sessions.

8Additional supporting information may be found in the online version of this article at the publisher’s website: www.wileyonlinelibrary.com.

9All online stages of the study were managed by a computer program developed for this experiment. The researcher was required to activate participants for each stage of the experiment by clicking a checkbox on the participant management screen. Once activated for a stage, an automated e-mail was sent to the participant indicating that he or she was eligible to complete the next stage of the experiment and provided a link to that stage. The program made it possible to send reminders to participants to ensure participants completed the stages in a timely manner.
without the scandal, participants read five newspaper articles presenting issue positions of the candidate on immigration, abortion, the environment, homeland security, and domestic partnership. In contrast, participants assigned to the scandal condition read the same newspaper articles on immigration, abortion, the environment, and domestic partnership, but did not read the homeland security article. Instead, participants read an article detailing the candidate’s confession of an extra-marital affair with a former aide. The confession was framed as an attempt to preempt a tell-all TV interview with the former aide (please see the Supporting Information for the text of this article).

Debriefing Session. Once participants completed the online portion of the study, they were debriefed in person and the $500 was awarded by random draw.

Results

The longitudinal nature of the experiment made it possible to distinguish the immediate effect of scandal from any lasting effects on candidate evaluation. All participants were exposed to issue information about the candidate through the first three stages and asked to evaluate the candidate at the end of each stage. During Stage 4, participants were either exposed to scandalous information about the candidate or additional issue information. Immediately following exposure to the fourth article, participants were asked to indicate their feelings toward the candidate. All participants were then exposed to new information about the candidate in Stage 5 and asked to complete a final evaluation of the candidate in Stage 6. As a result, prior affect (the evaluation at Stage 3) can be isolated from the immediate reaction to the scandal (the evaluation at Stage 4), and any lasting effect (the evaluation at Stage 6).

Immediate Effects of Scandal

Mounting evidence in political science demonstrates a negative effect of scandalous information on candidate evaluation. To examine H1, participants in the no scandal condition were compared to participants in the scandal condition in terms of their evaluation of the candidate at the end of Stage 4.\(^\text{10}\) Participants in the scandal condition evaluated the candidate more negatively ($M = 2.59, SD = 1.07$) after exposure to the scandal than those in the no

\(^{10}\) For the purposes of the analyses, the four groups were collapsed into two: a no scandal condition and a scandal condition. Doing so has no effect on the conclusions. A 2 (scandal or no scandal) × 2 (liberal or conservative) ANOVA indicated a main effect for scandal presence ($F_{1,361} = 43.07, p < 0.001$) and a main effect for candidate ideology ($F_{1,361} = 24.08, p < 0.001$); however, the interaction between scandal exposure and the ideology of the candidate was not significantly related to candidate evaluation ($F_{1,361} = 0.86, p = 0.35$).
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scandal condition ($M = 3.33, SD = 1.14; F_{1,361} = 41.03, p < 0.001$). It is important to note that participants in both the scandal condition ($M = 3.34, SD = 1.16$) and the no scandal condition ($M = 3.30, SD = 1.10$) evaluated the candidate in a similar manner ($F_{1,361} = 0.08, p = 0.77$) prior to exposure to the scandal.

However, this reaction may not be uniform across individuals. One’s prior affect toward a candidate may moderate the effect of scandal on evaluation.\textsuperscript{11} Two competing hypotheses were proposed. Given prior research on motivated reasoning, H2a posits that exposure to scandal may have the strongest effect among the candidate’s detractors. However, H2b argues that the effect of scandal may be small among nonsupporters as their opinion of the candidate is already low, whereas a candidate’s supporters are likely to be the most affected by his scandal involvement in the immediate aftermath.

Thus, a 2 (scandal presence) $\times$ 5 (prior affect) ANOVA was computed to examine the effect of scandal and prior affect on the immediate postscandal response to the candidate. As a reminder, prior affect was created from the evaluation of the candidate two days prior to the scandal presentation (Stage 3). This measure ranged from very negative (1) to very positive (5).\textsuperscript{12} There was a main effect for both scandal ($F_{1,361} = 43.39, p < 0.001$) and prior affect ($F_{1,361} = 46.46, p < 0.001$). Exposure to the scandal produced more negative feelings toward the candidate than exposure to his position on homeland security. Further, supporters of the candidate remained positively disposed to him, whereas detractors retained their negative feelings toward the candidate.

The interactive effect of scandal and prior affect was also significant ($F_{1,361} = 2.37, p < 0.05$). Figure 1 demonstrates the difference in reaction to the scandal across the range of prior affect for participants in the scandal condition (gray line) and participants in the no scandal condition (black line). The gap in evaluation between participants in the no scandal condition and the scandal condition increases as prior affect becomes more positive. Simple contrasts indicate that the difference between detractors in the scandal condition and detractors in the no scandal condition was not significant, $t(24) = 0.20, p = 0.84$. In contrast, supporters of the candidate reacted the most negatively to the scandal. The difference between supporters in the scandal condition and supporters in the no scandal condition was significantly related to the postscandal response to the candidate, $t(44) = 5.30, p < 0.001$.

\textsuperscript{11}While much research on scandal examines the possibility that partisanship moderates the negative effect of scandal on evaluation, the campaign discussed in this experiment was a nonpartisan mayoral race. As a result, the most prevalent individual-level characteristic (partisanship) explored in previous research is not applicable.

\textsuperscript{12}For ease of description, participants feeling very positive toward the candidate in Stage 3 are referred to as supporters of the candidate. Participants feeling very negative toward the candidate in Stage 3 are referred to as the candidate’s detractors or opponents.
**NOTE:** This figure illustrates the mean evaluation of the candidate in Stage 4 among participants in the scandal condition (gray line) and participants in the no scandal condition (black line) across the range of prior affect.

### Lasting Effects of Scandal

While these results appear inconsistent with a motivated reasoning perspective, H3 suggests otherwise. While an immediate negative reaction to scandal may be unavoidable and may influence supporters to a greater extent than detractors, H3 argues that this negative reaction is unlikely to persist in the long-term, especially among supporters. Instead, the candidate’s supporters should quickly return to their positive impression of the candidate after their initial negative reaction. In contrast, detractors will lack the motivation to improve their disposition toward the candidate and should sustain their negative reaction over time.

A measure of the difference between the evaluation of the candidate at Stage 4 and the evaluation of the candidate at Stage 6 was created to explore these expectations. This measure is equal to zero if the participant’s evaluation of the candidate at Stage 4 was equivalent to her evaluation at Stage 6. The measure is negative if the participant’s feelings toward the candidate became
FIGURE 2
Lasting Effect of Scandal

Note: This figure illustrates the difference between the evaluation of the candidate in Stage 4 and Stage 6 among participants in the scandal condition (gray line) and participants in the no scandal condition (black line) across the range of prior affect.

more negative from Stage 4 to 6. Alternatively, the measure is positive if the participant’s feelings toward the candidate improved from Stage 4 to 6.

A 2 (scandal presence) × 5 (prior affect) ANOVA was computed to examine the effect of scandal and prior affect on the difference between the immediate reaction to scandal (Stage 4) and the longer-term response to the candidate (Stage 6). There was a main effect for both scandal ($F_{1, 360} = 17.22, p < 0.001$) and prior affect ($F_{1, 360} = 4.09, p < 0.001$). Post hoc comparisons indicated that participants in the scandal condition improved their attitudes toward the candidate after their initially negative reaction to a greater extent than participants in the no scandal condition. Initial supporters of the candidate also became more positive toward the candidate over time.

The interactive effect of scandal and prior affect was also significantly related to change in evaluation over time ($F_{1, 360} = 3.57, p < 0.01$). Figure 2 illustrates the change in evaluation from Stage 4 to Stage 6 for participants in the scandal (gray line) and no scandal (black line) conditions across the range of prior affect. Simple contrasts indicate that detractors in both the scandal and no
scandal conditions became more negative toward the candidate over time, \(t(24) = 0.84, p = 0.41\). However, supporters of the candidate improved their evaluation from Stage 4 to 6 to a greater extent in the scandal condition than in the no scandal condition, \(t(44) = -3.80, p < 0.001\).

**Conclusion**

Political researchers have examined the effect scandal has on the aspirations of political candidates and the careers of public officials. The present study builds on this research by considering whether scandal has an immediate negative effect on candidate evaluation and, most importantly, whether scandal has a lasting effect on evaluation. An immediate negative reaction to scandalous incidents is largely unavoidable. Such incidents involve politicians behaving in ways that are inconsistent with prevailing moral standards. However, an immediate negative reaction to scandal may not last for all observers as individuals recover from their initial shock and return to their prescandal affect for the candidate.

The results of a longitudinal experiment support the three hypotheses stemming from this argument. Participants reacted negatively to scandalous information, but the magnitude of this negative effect was greater among supporters of the candidate. At first blush, this finding appears inconsistent with the extant literature. However, detractors of a candidate have little room to dislike him further after scandal involvement. In contrast, affect for a previously liked candidate has substantial room to plummet after scandal involvement. However, a candidate’s supporters should be the most likely to reverse their negative reaction over time. Consistent with this expectation, supporters of the candidate quickly returned to their prescandal affect for the candidate.

There are both practical and theoretical consequences associated with this avenue of research. From a theoretical perspective, the present research suggests that understanding the effects of scandal on the electoral success of candidates requires differentiating between the immediate reaction to a scandal and long-term effects. This distinction requires an appropriate methodological technique. Laboratory research on scandal is likely to reveal the immediate effect of scandal, whereas survey research may reveal more long-term effects. To get at the short- and long-term effects of scandal on evaluation requires a combination approach, such as the longitudinal experiment used in the present study.

Practically, this work suggests that the timing of scandal disclosure can be especially meaningful in terms of the electoral success of candidates. Candidates would be well-advised to avoid scandalous involvement in general, but last-minute disclosure of a scandal may be particularly problematic for candidates. This conclusion is consistent with recent work by Doherty, Dowling, and Miller (2013), which examines the timing of scandal involvement. The
researchers find that the effect of scandal involvement decreases as time since the scandal increases. The present study explores which voters are most likely to rebound.

These findings point to a number of topics for future research. While the present study focuses on individual-level reaction to scandal over the long haul, further research is needed to examine the role of news coverage. Continuous reminders may serve to remind voters of the negative feelings they had at initial exposure and serve to inform those not exposed to the original information. This possibility points to the need to examine specific scandalous incidents to determine if the immediate and rebound effects identified in the present study vary according to the intensity of media coverage. Additionally, a growing body of research finds that voters react differently to financial and moral scandals (Basinger, 2013; Carlson, Ganiel, and Hyde, 2000; Doherty, Dowling, and Miller, 2011). To fully understand the long-term implications of scandal involvement, future research must address the differential effects of different types of scandals both in the short term and the long term. Finally, future research could be pursued outside of the American context. The argument focuses on individual-level reaction to a candidate’s scandalous behavior; thus, the argument could be tested in other candidate-centered contexts. However, exploring the diminishing effects of scandal in party-based systems would require modification of the argument as candidate evaluation takes on a different character in such systems.

REFERENCES


**Supporting Information**

Additional Supporting Information may be found in the online version of this article at the publisher’s website.