
CURRENT RESEARCH IN SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

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Submitted: August 29, 2011

Revised: November 6, 2011

Accepted: November 10, 2011

WHEN THE PERSONAL BECOMES POLITICAL: MITIGATING DAMAGE FOLLOWING SCANDALS

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to assess the potency of smear campaigns in politics and whether damage can be mitigated. The main effects of and interactions between different types of scandals (adultery, misuse of public money/tax evasion & abuses of power), types of accounting strategies (excuse, justification, refusal & concession), and the gender of the politician are tested. Respondents evaluate the politicians in terms of perceptions of their integrity, persuasiveness and openness following the scandal, as well as assessing the electoral impact of the scandal and the limits of privacy. Politicians who justify their behavior positively or deny involvement altogether can mitigate the damage to some extent.

INTRODUCTION

The focus on personal morality and probity and the evaluation of political candidates according to ideal moral codes is not new, but that focus has in recent times been at the expense of other issues (Garment 1991; Williams 1998; Dobel 1998; Apostolidis and Williams 2004; Tumber and Waisbord 2004; Neckel 2005; Thompson 2005). Despite the increased media focus on scandals, voters can separate opinions about a politician's personal behavior and political performance, as the case of Bill Clinton shows that it is possible to maintain high job approval ratings while voters disapprove of personal conduct (Jamieson and Aday 1998). A politician's perceived competence is one of the most important characteristics for voters in deciding whether to support the politician, and perceptions of competence aid politicians in recovering from scandals (Funk 1996; Tiedens 2001). This study investigates how a politician can mitigate, or perhaps even avoid, political damage.

Type of Scandal

Thompson (1997) identifies three types of political scandal: sex scandals; fraud or corruption; and abuses of power – or sex, money and power. Sex scandals often capture more media and public attention than allegations of financial impropriety or abuses of power partly because detailed explanations of the actual transgression are generally not required (Apostolidis and

Williams 2004). Sex scandals engage the politically uninterested with more culturally proximate narratives of recognizable themes of broken hearts, broken families and broken marriages, which mimic soaps and enable moral reflection on larger social issues, unlike more complicated financial scandals (Thompson 1997; Tomlinson 1997; Clark 2003; Williams 2004).

While political observers often dismiss sex scandals as trivial distractions, they represent deeper political conflicts about sexual morality, which is why norms and moral codes governing the conduct of sexual relations are particularly prone to scandal (Thompson 1997; Clark 2003; Gamson 2004). Gamson (2004) argues that the theme uniting political sex scandals has less to do with sex or sexual transgression and more to do with inauthenticity, that is, revelations of a private life that contradict the professed public persona. While money and power scandals can also contradict this persona, they tend to reinforce pre-existing negative stereotypes of politicians acting in self-interest and for personal gain. It is expected that sex scandals will be the most damaging.

Type of Account

Drawing upon the work of political accountability theorists, Gonzales et al. (1995) first identified four types of accounting strategies: concessions (admissions of wrongdoing or apologies and remorse), excuses (acknowledgement of wrongdoing but denial of personal responsibility or blaming others or circumstances), justifications (accepting responsibility but redefining the act or its consequences as less serious), and refusals (denials). Tiedens (2001) found that in relation to sex scandals, such as the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal, people confer more power and status to politicians who express anger rather than sadness. Expressions of anger contributed to perceptions that the politician was unlikeable and cold but also generated perceptions of competence, while expressions of sadness provide a 'short-hand' communication of warmth (Tiedens 2001). Anger is associated more closely with excuses and refusals while sadness can come through concessions. Smith et al. (2005) argue justifications and denials provide voters with an explanation from which they can favorably reinterpret or contextualize the event, while excuses are comparatively perceived as weak and negative. Particularly in contemporary politics where voters can be skeptical of 'spin', which excuses could be perceived as being, and therefore draw more attention to the transgression itself. It is expected that excuses will be the least effective accounting strategy

Gender of the Politician

Scandalous transgressions can seem more remarkable when characteristics of difference are involved, particularly race, gender, class and sexual orientation (Lull and Hinerman 1997). Furthermore, citizens with limited information about a politician are most likely to use stereotypes to infer character traits and competencies based on the politician's gender and to remember schematic-confirming information, while the more politically aware will base their perceptions on more substantive information (Renn and Calvert 1993; Koch 1999). Voters can have a baseline gender preference, which reflect past experiences with female politicians and also general gender stereotypes, which are difficult to change (Kunda and Oleson 1995; Sanbonmatsu 2002).

Female politicians are often scrutinized more intensely and judged more harshly than their male counterparts (*see* Motion 1996; Seltzer and Newman 1997; Henderson 1999; Van Acker 1999; Jenkins 2002; Baird 2004). Henderson (1999) explains the media's treatment of female politicians using the pedestal theory. As women are less common in politics, they are placed on a metaphoric pedestal by unrealistically high expectations and then criticized for falling from the pedestal. Female politicians are vulnerable to particular types of the scandals, notably sex scandals, where gender has greater saliency. Smith et al. (2005) found that the gender of the politician interacts with the type of scandal, that is, male and female politicians were judged differently based on the type of scandal. Therefore it is expected that female politicians will be judged particularly harshly when involved in the sex scandal as this particular scandal could also evoke stereotypes of gender roles in society and what is and is not acceptable sexual behavior for males and females.

Gender of the Respondent

Opinion polls often show small differences between males and females in their political leanings and in their support for particular issues. Smith et al. (2005) unexpectedly found that the gender of the respondent rather than the gender of the politician influenced evaluations at least some of the time, and they theorized that just as men and women differ in terms of policy concerns and levels of political interest, they also seem to differ in how they receive and interpret political communications. Females are persuaded more by counterstereotypic portrayals than males, while males are more receptive to negative stereotypic portrayals than females (Murphy 1998).

Political leadership is often perceived as being more stereotypically masculine and incongruent with female gender roles (Eagly and Karau 2002). This is also consistent with double standards theory, which posits that status characteristics such as gender, can influence performance expectations and create double-standards where perceptions of success or failure at the masculine task of political leadership advantages men (Foschi 1996). Complementing these approaches is expectation states theory, where women who challenge the expected status order and assert their leadership credentials, can be sanctioned (Ridgeway 2001). This is particularly relevant when it comes to scandals, as politicians must reassert themselves and their political competence in the wake of scandal, making it potentially even more difficult for female politicians to recover. The counterstereotype is of a strong female leader with the skills to navigate through a scandal, while the negative stereotype is of an incompetent performer vulnerable to transgressions. Thus it can be expected that female respondents will be more receptive to female politicians who confidently respond to a scandal, while male respondents are more likely to be harsh in their appraisals.

METHOD

Participants

The non-probability, opportunistic sample was drawn from two university subjects (one undergraduate introductory political science subject and one postgraduate public administration subject). Two hundred and forty students (93 males and 147 females) aged between 18 and 46 years (mean age was 22 years) participated (a response rate of over 95 percent), with the skew

towards female and younger participants reflecting the general composition of the courses. In terms of partisanship, the sample was broadly representative of the general population.

Materials and Procedures

To test the main and interactive effects of scandal type, account type, politician's gender and participant's gender a survey containing fictitious newspaper articles about politics and a series of questions evaluating the featured politicians was used. Twenty-four versions of a survey were randomly distributed. The only difference between the surveys was the newspaper article about a political scandal, with various facts within the article manipulated to test certain variables. The use of newspaper articles featuring political scandals has been a common approach in previous studies (*see* Gonzales et al. 1995; Smith et al., 2005). Each of the twenty-four versions contained a slightly different article about a political scandal. The fictitious articles used the same fonts and formatting as actual newspaper articles and were photocopied onto the surveys to appear as if they had been cut out of a real newspaper. In most versions, the politician was a man named Donald Cussa, but in some versions the politician was a woman named Donna Cussa. The politician was depicted as an Independent Member of Parliament (MP). The different versions also contained different types of scandals: sex scandal (adulterous threesome); financial scandal (misuse of a taxpayer-funded car and tax evasion); and an abuse of power (misuse of a political position to evade a fine and to claim insurance). Finally, the response of the politician differed. The politician offered an excuse (admitting wrongdoing but denying responsibility); a justification (denying the offensiveness of the act but accepting responsibility); a refusal (denying the act itself); or a concession (accepting full responsibility and expressing remorse or shame).

After reading the newspaper article about the political scandal, respondents were first asked to evaluate the politician's personality traits, response and behavior on a 9-point Likert scale in terms of Credibility, Competence, Certainty, Convincingness, Intelligence, Trustworthiness, Likeability, Appeal, Honesty, Friendliness, Warmth, Goodness and Positivity (adapted from Chanley et al. 1994; Gonzales et al. 1995). The final set of items was a series of statements both positive and negative, and respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement on a nine-point Likert scale. The statements are contained in Appendix A.

RESULTS

Typically a factorial omnibus ANOVA is used to examine the main effects and interactions, but with four explanatory variables and numerous dependent measures, it becomes unnecessarily complex to examine all the possible relationships. Thus the analysis is based on a simplified 48-group one-way ANOVA using planned contrasts based on the hypotheses, and this type of analysis distinguishes this study from previous similar studies (*cf.* Chanley et al. 1994; Gonzales et al. 1995; Smith et al. 2005). The interactions of interest in this study are between the type of scandal and the type of account; the type of scandal and the gender of the politician; and the type of scandal and the gender of the participant.

Many of the dependent measures appeared to be capturing similar character traits, and the correlations between the variables ranged between .103 and .782 (with most *rs* between .3 and .7,

see Appendix B). Thus a factor analysis was conducted to attempt to identify the underlying factors. The first component consisted of Trustworthiness, Appeal, Likeability, Positivity, Credibility, Honesty, Competence, Goodness and Intelligence (factor loadings ranging from .620 to .861). The similarities between these measures can be conceptualized in a few different ways, but as a way to distinguish them from the other measures for the purposes of this study, they will collectively be described as *Integrity*. A nine-point composite scale containing the nine measures was created, with endpoints of one and nine and higher means indicating more favorable evaluations of Integrity.

The second component consisted of Poll, Wrongdoing, Anger, Reputation, Responsibility, Blameworthiness, Public Interest, Vote and Resignation (factor loadings ranging from .552 to .789). The Public Interest, Reputation, Responsibility, Anger, Wrongdoing, and Resignation items were reversed-scored so that higher values indicated more forgiving or more liberal responses, consistent with the previous items. This component appears to be conceptually describing the *Electoral Impact*. Again, a composite scale was created in the same manner as the previous component. The third component contained only two measures – Convincingness and Certainty (factor loadings of .890 and .661). These two measures can be collectively conceptualized as *Persuasiveness*. The fourth and final component also only contained two measures – Friendliness and Warmth, and are conceptualized as *Openness* (factor loadings of .854 and .745). Thus five main dependent variables were included in the model: *Integrity*, *Impact*, *Persuasiveness*, *Openness*, and the separate variable, *Privacy*. The significant main and interaction effects on the variables are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Results of a 48-group One-way ANOVA: Mean Evaluations

Sig. Main Effects				
Politician's Gender	Male	Female		
<i>Integrity</i>	3.59	4.23		
<i>Privacy</i>	5.80	6.41		
<i>Impact</i>	4.04	4.80		
Scandal Type	Sex	Money	Power	
<i>Integrity</i>	3.97	4.16	3.16	
<i>Persuasiveness</i>	5.03	4.74	4.25	
<i>Openness</i>	5.27	4.90	4.65	
<i>Impact</i>	4.92	4.42	3.93	
Account Type	Excuse	Justify	Refuse	Concede

Sig. Main Effects				
<i>Integrity</i>	3.38	4.10	4.45	3.70
<i>Persuasiveness</i>	3.92	5.02	5.24	4.51
<i>Openness</i>	4.65	5.00	5.06	5.08
<i>Privacy</i>	5.57	6.77	6.02	6.09
<i>Impact</i>	3.91	4.82	4.85	4.12
Sig. Interactions				
<i>Integrity</i>	Partic. Gender			
Politician's Gender	Male	Female		
Male	4.03	3.34		
Female		4.32		
<i>Persuasiveness</i>	Scandal Type			
Account Type	Sex	Money	Power	
Excuse	4.12	3.95	3.66	
Justification	5.68	4.90	4.41	
Refusal	4.93	5.38	5.47	
Concession	5.31	4.76	3.31	

The type of scandal influenced the respondents' evaluations of the politician's *Integrity*, $F(2,188) = 4.54$, $p < .05$, *Openness*, $F(1,188) = 4.94$, $p < .01$, and *Impact*, $F(1,188) = 4.35$, $p < .05$, although the effect sizes were very small (partial eta-squared = .046, 0.50 & .044 respectively). Scandal type also affected respondents' evaluations of *Persuasiveness*, but was interactive with account type. Politicians involved in sex scandals were evaluated the least negatively ($M_s = 5.03$ for *Persuasiveness*, 5.27 for *Openness* and 4.92 for *Impact*), with the exception of *Integrity* ($M = 3.97$). Politicians who abused the power of their position were evaluated the most negatively ($M_s = 3.16$, 4.25, 4.65 & 3.93). Post-hoc tests revealed that there were significant differences between the sex and power scandals in relation to *Openness* ($p < .01$) and *Impact* ($p < .001$), while in relation to *Integrity* the significant difference was between the money and power scandals ($p < .05$).

Excuses were evaluated most negatively ($M_s = 3.38$ for *Integrity*, 3.92 for *Persuasiveness*, 4.65 for *Openness*, 5.57 for *Privacy* and 3.91 for *Impact*), however justifications were not always the most effective form of blame avoidance. Refusals were evaluated least negatively in relation to *Integrity* ($M = 4.45$), and concessions were evaluated least negatively in terms of *Openness* ($M = 5.08$), while justifications afforded politicians with the highest level of *Privacy* ($M = 6.77$). The type of account also produced main effects, influencing the respondents' evaluations of the politician's *Integrity*, $F(2,188) = 10.73$, $p < .001$, and *Openness*, $F(2,188) = 4.09$, $p < .01$, and opinions about the *Impact*, $F(2,188) = 9.86$, $p < .001$, and the politician's *Privacy*, $F(2,188) = 2.73$, $p < .05$. Again, while there was a main effect on evaluations of *Persuasiveness*, this interacted with scandal type. The effect sizes were once again small, although account type produced larger main effects than scandal type (partial eta-squared = $.146$ for *Integrity*, $.113$ for *Persuasiveness*, $.061$ for *Openness*, $.042$ for *Privacy* and $.136$ for *Impact*).

The differences between justifications and excuses were statistically significant in relation to *Integrity* ($p < .05$), *Impact* ($p < .01$) and *Privacy* ($p < .05$). There were also significant differences between refusals and excuses and between refusals and concessions in relation to both *Integrity* ($p < .001$ and $p < .01$, respectively) and *Impact* ($p < .05$ for both). Further analysis revealed that evaluations of *Openness* significantly differed between the other accounts and excuses ($p < .05$). Refusals did have a different effect depending on the type of scandal but in an unexpected way, and it was not significantly more effective in regards to sex scandals. Refusals were contrasted with the other accounts and sex scandals were contrasted with money and power scandals. The only significant interaction between the scandal type and account type was in relation to *Persuasiveness* ($F(2,188) = 4.16$, $p < .05$, partial eta-squared = $.042$). Further analysis of the interaction affecting *Persuasiveness* revealed two significant differences: when sex scandals were excluded from the analysis, excuses, justifications and concessions are combined in one group against refusals ($p < .001$); and when refusals are excluded from the analysis, money and power scandals are combined in one group against sex scandals ($p < .01$). Thus, in the money and power scandals, politicians offering refusals were considered significantly more persuasive than when they offered any other account. In terms of the other accounts (excuses, justifications and concessions), they were significantly more persuasive when used in relation to sex scandals than money and power scandals.

Scandalized female politicians were not evaluated more negatively than scandalized male politicians. However, the gender of the politician only significantly affected the *Impact*, $F(1,188) = 10.75$, $p < .01$, partial eta-squared = $.054$, and opinions of the politician's *Privacy*, $F(1,188) = 5.14$, $p < .05$, partial eta-squared = $.027$. The electoral impact for female politicians was less negative than for male politicians (reverse-scored $M_s = 4.80$ and 4.04 respectively), while women were also afforded more respect for privacy than men ($M_s = 6.41$ and 5.80 respectively). The effect on *Integrity* was also significant, $F(1,188) = 8.05$, $p < .01$, partial eta-squared = $.041$, but interacts with the gender of the participant.

There was only one significant gendered interaction in terms of the respondents' evaluation of the politician's *Integrity* ($F(2,188) = 5.59$, $p < .05$), and the effect was very small (partial eta-squared = $.029$). Further analysis revealed that female participants' evaluations of the *Integrity* of male and female politicians significantly differed ($p < .001$), and female participants evaluated

female politicians more favorably than male politicians ($M_s = 4.32$ and 3.34 respectively). The gender of the respondent alone did not produce any significant main effects.

DISCUSSION

In general, the abuse of power was evaluated most negatively while sex scandals were evaluated more favorably. Sex scandals often capture more public attention initially, but they are also the easiest to dismiss with the argument that it is not in the public interest and should not be reported or publicly dissected, unlike money and power scandals (Ortega 2004; Williams 2004). People may be interested in a scandal and even consider the transgression immoral and unethical without that necessarily affecting their evaluations of the professional performance of the politician (Jamieson and Aday 1998). Abuses of power more directly reflect upon a politician's professionalism.

The experiment did find evidence that the type of accounting strategy influenced respondents' evaluations of the politician and opinions about the electoral impact and the politician's right to privacy. In general, the experiment found that justifications and refusals were the most effective and excuses the least. However, one of the methodological problems in testing evaluations of accounting strategies experimentally is that in real-life situations the response of the politician cannot always be neatly placed into a discrete category (*see* Gonzales et al. 1990; Koch 1999). The other difficulty is that politicians sometimes change strategy as the scandal progresses, beginning with one type of response and then responding differently as new allegations emerge. Scandals have a cumulative effect and the experiment can only measure one fixed point in time (*see* Markovits and Silverstein 1988). It is also important to remember that the experiment tested initial reactions, as the politician and the scandal were unknown to the participants (as they were fictitious). Thus a denial in the initial stages could conceivably be effective, as respondents could have been more cynical and skeptical towards the media, and the accuracy of their reporting, than towards the politician (Kenski 2003).

In relation to the gender of the politician and the type of scandal there were some notable findings. Generally, female politicians were evaluated less negatively than male politicians, and sex scandals were evaluated less negatively than abuses of power. However, some of these broad findings must be viewed with caution. There was an over-representation of female participants, and while the gender of the participant did not produce a main effect on the evaluations, it did interact with the gender of the politician. There were also limitations in the experimental design that could be addressed for future experiments. For example, respondents were not reacting to their local representative, but a distant Independent representative in a different state. More importantly, respondents were compelled to read the articles, whereas in the real world there are many issues on the media agenda competing for public attention (*see* Tiffen 1999). Perhaps if respondents were asked to scan a typical newspaper with only one scandal article, they may have even overlooked it.

As already noted, female politicians did not appear to sustain any greater political damage because of their gender. While it has been argued that women in power, and their exercise of power, are sexualized (Dobel 1998; Clark 2003), female politicians did not appear to be more susceptible to sex scandals than other types of scandal. Thus while media coverage can be sexist

and gender is an obviously identifiable factor in political scandals, in this study there was no substantial evidence suggesting that females are significantly disadvantaged by scandals compared with males. However, the issue of gender inequality in politics is broader and more complex than this study could analyze, and therefore can only offer some specific findings about gender and scandals. The experiments actually found that male politicians were evaluated more negatively than female politicians, although there was an interaction with the gender of the participant and females were overrepresented in the sample.

Attitudes towards women in politics are changing, as shown by the experimental data taken from a relatively young sample, but this is not completely reflective of the wider electorate. Furthermore, real-life scandals are often more complex and evoke more gendered roles and stereotypes than presented in the simple vignettes. Future research could further categorize respondents according to age cohorts to test whether generational change in gender stereotypes (if any) is a factor in evaluations. Women are becoming more visible in politics and attaining leadership positions in greater numbers, yet much of the literature in this area is becoming dated. That is not to dismiss these important contributions to understanding women in political leadership positions, but just as it is problematic to stereotype all female politicians, so too is it simplistic to view all voters as one bloc with the same gender schemas or even divided into two gendered groups. However, being female cannot simply be assumed to be a disadvantage in contemporary political scandals.

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APPENDIX A

The statements were that: It is in the public interest to for the media to report such issues (Public Interest); Cussa's reputation suffered in my eyes (Reputation); Cussa is responsible for what happened (Responsibility); If Cussa was my local Member of Parliament, I would not hold this incident against him/her when thinking about my vote (Vote); I felt angry after reading Cussa's explanation for his/her actions (Anger); If a newspaper contacted me for a poll, I would express support for Cussa (Poll); Cussa's wrongdoing was serious, regardless of the consequences (Wrongdoing); What politicians do in their private life is their own business (Privacy); Cussa should resign from parliament (Resignation).

APPENDIX B

		1	2	3	4	5
1. Integrity	<i>r</i>	1.000				
	Sig.	0.000				
2. Persuasiveness	<i>r</i>	0.580*	1.000			
	Sig.	0.000	0.000			
3. Openness	<i>r</i>	0.510*	0.392*	1.000		
	Sig.	0.000	0.000	0.000		
4. Privacy	<i>r</i>	0.239*	0.242*	0.176*	1.000	

		1	2	3	4	5
	Sig.	0.000	0.000	0.006	0.000	
5. Impact	<i>r</i>	0.689*	0.464*	0.454*	0.392*	1.000
	Sig.	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000

N = 240; * Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

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