# Surviving Political Scandals: Why Some Transgressions End Political Careers and Others Do Not

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*Objective.* In this article, we examine several explanations for why some politicians survive political scandals and others do not. These explanations include the nature and magnitude of the scandal, the political environment, and how the politician responds to the scandal. *Methods.* To identify scandals, we use the Lexis-Nexis database of Associated Press State and Local Wire (APSLW) articles between January 1, 2011 and December 31, 2014 to examine political scandals involving politicians in 14 states. Using data obtained from relevant news articles, we estimate multivariate models in order to predict the probability of surviving a political scandal, as well as the electoral margin of victory for those who do survive. *Findings.* We find that men, those in safe seats, those in favorable political environments, and those with support of their spouses are more likely to survive a political scandal. However, early-breaking scandals, those that are more severe, those that require an apology or aggressive defense, and those that are sexual in nature decrease the probability of survival. *Conclusion.* While scandals put politicians at risk, there are factors that insulate politicians from the adverse effects of their transgressions. These findings offer insights into why some politiciansacross levels of governmentseem somewhat immune to scandals, while others have their careers abruptly ended because of them.

Political scandals generate substantial attention from the media and scholars who are interested in how they are portrayed and how they influence elections (Sabato, 1991; Thompson, 2000; Newmark and Vaughan, 2014). Much of the focus is on the attention to scandals, explanations of the media's role in informing the public (Tumber and Waisbord, 2004), or the scandals themselves, which can—but do not always—end electoral ambitions or political careers (Patterson, 1994; Basinger, 2012). Scandals have been found to increase competitiveness in elections by attracting more viable challengers (Lazarus, 2008), and also result in increased voter turnout and smaller margins of victory for incumbents who do survive (Abramowitz, 1991; Praino, Stockemer, and Moscardelli, 2013). While there have been a number of studies of the effects of scandals on political careers, scholarship is somewhat lacking when it comes to addressing systematically why some candidates survive their scandals and others do not (Rottinghaus 2014a, 2014b; Basinger, 2012).

Empirical studies typically involve examination of one scandal (e.g., House banking scandal [Dimock and Jacobson, 1995]; Abramoff scandal [Dancey, 2014]), one group of elected officials (Praino, Stockemer, and Moscardelli, 2013), or data generated through experimental research (Mitchell, 2014; Vonnahme, 2014). Political experiments provide

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necessary data that are critical to our understanding of the elements involved in scandals, but also raise questions of external validity. Media and scholarly attention also tend to focus on scandals involving prominent national officials (often members of Congress), but many political scandals involve individuals at the state or local level of office. While these studies provide valuable insight, neglect of such a substantial portion of politicians involved in scandals limits the generalizability of empirical conclusions. Therefore, our test of several explanations for political survival includes actual events in which different elected officials were involved in different types of scandals. We find that while scandals put politicians at risk, there are factors that insulate politicians from the adverse effects of their transgressions. These findings offer insights into why some politicians—across levels of government—seem somewhat immune to scandals, while others have their careers abruptly ended because of them.

## Political Scandals

The literature lacks agreement on the "*who, what, and when*" elements necessary for constructing a uniform definition of political scandals (Basinger and Rottinghaus, 2012:216; Nyhan, 2015). However, there is consensus that despite allegations of bad behavior in a variety of settings, the mass media must intervene to publicize incidents in order for them to be considered scandals (Tumber and Waisbord, 2004; Rosenson, 2005; Nyhan, 2017). Nyhan (2015, 2017) conceptualizes scandals as political news events in which widespread perception of misconduct is a necessary condition, but contends that whether the alleged misconduct actually occurred is of little consequence. Here we use Scherer's (2008:7) definition of political scandals as "widely publicized events that involve the abuse of power or abuse of the public trust by elected or appointed officials."

Conceptualizing scandals as political events defined by the media and political environment provides an incomplete picture if we do not also consider the nature of the alleged misconduct, and the official's response to the allegations. Normatively, we should expect that serious misconduct by elected officials would disqualify them in the eyes of the voters from continuing to serve in office. Reality, however, suggests that other factors mitigate voters' disapproval and thereby protect those embroiled in scandal from losing their political careers. While scandals put candidates in jeopardy, their survival depends on the nature and magnitude of the scandals, the conditions under which scandals occur, and how the scandals are handled. We theorize that factors within the political environment insulate candidates from the effects of scandals, and the extent of this protection helps determine whether the scandal will derail the candidate's political ambitions.

### *Nature and Magnitude of Scandal*

Media coverage is an indication of the importance of a story, and thereby one indicator of a scandal's severity. How coverage influences the survivability of scandals is a bit unclear, however. Additional coverage may result in a decrease in the likelihood of survival because of the increased negativity and the fact that the scandal may crowd out accomplishments or other positive attributes of the campaign. Abramowitz (1991) notes that scandals have generally been found to have negative consequences for those involved.

Scandals vary in size, scope, and duration of coverage, which are factors that indicate the severity. Some are relatively minor, while others are serious transgressions that may involve

ethics commission investigations (cf. Rosenson, 2005, 2014), sanctions, indictments, or convictions. Simply being subject to an investigation can threaten an official's career (Roberds, 2003), so we hypothesize:

H1: The more serious the alleged misconduct, the less likely the official will survive the scandal.

Scandals also vary by type (Thompson, 2000; Doherty, Dowling, and Miller, 2011; Newmark and Vaughan, 2014). In Rosenson's (2014) examination of U.S. House ethics investigations, financially related scandals were among the most prevalent, and allegations of sexual and political misconduct are increasingly more common. There is some indication from experimental research that the public may respond more negatively to financial scandals compared to moral scandals, such as those that are sexual in nature (Funk, 1996; Doherty, Dowling, and Miller, 2011). Research is inconsistent, however, regarding whether allegations of financial or sexual misconduct have more dire consequences for officials (Basinger, 2012).

Cobb and Taylor (2014), for example, found that moral scandals can have negative spillover effects on members of the same party. Furthermore, Doherty, Dowling, and Miller (2014) found that people evaluate candidates differently based on whether the moral scandal occurred recently or years ago; sex scandals in the candidates' past were much less likely to affect support in current elections than more recent indiscretions. The same was not true, however, for financial scandals; tax evasion is possibly damaging in perpetuity. The key is that financial and sex scandals are of interest to the public because they involve issues of the misuse of public funds, undermine trust in government, or focus on issues of morality, which may mobilize voters. Therefore:

H2: Officials facing allegations of financial or sexual misconduct are less likely to survive the political scandal than those facing allegations of nonfinancial or nonsexual misconduct.

### *Political Environment*

Although the nature and magnitude of the alleged misconduct jeopardize reelection chances, there are factors that can insulate candidates from the negative effects of scandals. For example, Democrats should more likely survive political scandals in Democratic states or districts, and Republicans should do likewise in Republican-leaning areas. Conversely, a Democrat in a Republican state or a Republican in a Democratic state should be more vulnerable because voters will more quickly condemn a politician from the opposite party. Therefore, ceteris paribus:

H3: Politicians in states congruent with their partisanship will more likely survive than those in states that are not congruent with their partisanship.

Relatedly, politicians or candidates in relatively safe districts or states are better able to survive political scandals than those in marginal ones. If a scandal depresses opinion of a candidate and subsequent votes, we should expect a decrease in electoral margins from one election to another following a scandal. Safe seats provide an additional margin of error for the candidate embroiled in a political scandal. Many legislative districts are drawn such that they are no longer competitive; 40 percent of candidates run unopposed, and over 90

percent of legislative races can be uncompetitive in many states.[1] Therefore, it is easier to survive a political scandal without a significant challenger than it is with one, so:

H4:  Politicians in "safe seats" will more likely survive scandals than those in competitive races.

Incumbents with an established and popular record on policy issues may have a cache of goodwill that elicits loyalty if not forgiveness from constituents. Miller (2010) noted that coverage of political scandals can serve to help citizens recall policy-related information. Therefore, if the candidate has had a long tenure in office, the impact of the scandal is likely less damaging because voters already have a wealth of policy-related information to draw upon when making their ballot decisions. While an experienced candidate's margin of victory will still be less than it would have been without the scandal (Praino, Stockemer, and Moscardelli, 2013; Abramowitz, 1991), the likelihood of survival remains. We expect those who have been in their current position for a greater number of years will be better protected from the fallout of scandals than their less experienced counterparts because of greater name recognition, history of constituency service, and/or provision of benefits to their jurisdiction. Thus:

H5:  The longer an official has served in public office, the more likely that official will survive a scandal.

Proximity to Election Day may also serve as a mitigating factor for surviving a scandal. We know from work by Praino, Stockemer, and Moscardelli (2013) that electoral margins decline after a scandal breaks, and negative effects last beyond the election. If this is the case, time does not necessarily heal all wounds, and scandals that break well before elections will be subject to greater scrutiny. We suggest there are primacy effects (Krosnick and Alwin, 1987), where early-breaking scandals will leave a lasting, negative impression on voters, resulting in enduring negative candidate assessments. While the media often talk about the "October surprise," the reality is that vote determinations are usually crystalized in advance of an election, and few voters are likely influenced by late-breaking scandals. Therefore:

H6:  The closer to Election Day that a scandal breaks, the more likely the politician will survive.

Several scholars have examined the relationship between sex/gender and scandals (Huddy and Capelos, 2002; Maule and Goidel, 2003; Smith, Powers, and Suarez, 2005).[2] Women candidates are sometimes judged by traits that their counterparts are not (cf. Stewart et al., 2013; Dunaway et al., 2013). Scandals create a scenario that may take politicians away from these preconceived norms, which tends to hurt women candidates to a greater extent than men.

While Smith, Powers, and Suarez (2005) found that females are not penalized more severely than their male counterparts, and stereotypically "female" scandals may be more readily excused than stereotypically "male" scandals, other research finds that sex does matter in candidate assessments. Experimental work by Stewart et al. (2013:376) framed the role of gender as the contrast between "agentic" (i.e., "assertive, controlling, and confident") traits that are perceived as predominantly male attributes and "communal" or "welfare of others" attributes primarily associated with females. This suggests that female officials who act in ways that violate common perceptions of female attributes face a greater struggle for

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[1]Available at ⟨https://ballotpedia.org/Competitiveness_in_State_Legislative_Elections:_1972-2014⟩.
[2]The literature does not always differentiate sex and gender. While we are interested in gender, we do use terms for sex (male and female) when referencing scholarship that used these terms.

political survival. Notably, elections with female candidates often focus on traits as opposed to issues (Dunaway et al., 2013), which can pose additional challenges for them. Thus, we hypothesize that:

H7: Women are less likely to survive political scandals than men.

### *Response to Scandal*

The strategic handling of scandals also contributes to the likelihood of survival. Smith, Powers, and Suarez (2005) determined that politicians have three strategic choices: (1) aggressively defend themselves; (2) apologize to garner sympathy; or (3) ignore the scandal and hope it goes away. While politicians can weigh the costs and benefits of each option, the outcome of their choice of strategy is uncertain because of limited information regarding how others will react. Smith et al. found that coming up with excuses may be the worst option for dealing with a scandal, and note there is little difference between denying a scandal and attempting to justify it. We suggest that aggressively defending or apologizing signals that the scandal is portentous or that there is some culpability on the part of the politician. Thus, these strategies are used only when necessary; politicians who are in less danger would more likely ignore scandals to avoid giving them legs. Therefore, we hypothesize:

H8: Issuing an apology or mounting an aggressive defense against the allegations decrease a politician's likelihood of surviving a scandal.

While a politician's defense of the scandal may be counterproductive, support from party elites as well as politicians' spouses may be beneficial. This support may not guarantee survival, but the absence of such support is detrimental (Woessner, 2005; Stewart et al., 2013). Cues from elites in both the incumbent's party and the opposition serve to frame the nature and severity of the scandal; these cues are utilized by citizens in their evaluation of the candidate's behavior. If party elites and/or the politicians' spouses signal that they support the candidates and do not think the scandals are that severe, then voters may discount the scandals and support them, too. Therefore, we hypothesize:

H9: Politicians with party or spousal support will more likely survive than those without support.

Summarily, survival is a function of whether factors that insulate politicians from survival outweigh the factors that put them at risk.

### Research Design

To identify scandals, we used the Lexis-Nexis database of Associated Press State and Local Wire articles between January 1, 2011 and December 31, 2014. Fourteen states were examined—California, Indiana, Kansas, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New Mexico, North Carolina, North Dakota, Oregon, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Vermont—to obtain variation in demographics, size, partisan leanings, political culture, and geographic dispersion. We wanted variation based on the Bureau of Economic Analysis's regions, and then within those regions, we sought variation in terms of size and partisanship.[3]

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[3]We also test for state effects in our analysis (see note 11).

Several searches were conducted using different combinations and variations of the following search terms: "ethics," "scandal," "corruption," "violate," "politic," "official," "government," "legislate," "resign," "investigation," "indicted," and "charge." The search parameters produced nearly 1,200 articles, per year, per state, on average, which totaled over 67,305 articles. These articles were then examined to determine which ones involved political scandals and were suitable for analysis. Exclusions were made of scandals involving nonelected officials, those elected to minor offices such as coroners or tax assessors, those that did not occur during the time period under study, and those where there was not an election or resignation after the scandal broke.[4]

The content of each of the remaining articles was examined and organized by individual scandal.[5] For each scandal, a coding sheet was completed with information on when the scandal broke, the type and severity of the scandal (coverage, disposition), other officials involved, how the officials responded, whether they survived, and their margin of victory at the next election. As a result of this, the list of scandals was reduced because some individuals did not fall within the timeframe chosen for analysis.

The data set is constrained to 62 scandals for which we were able to analyze relevant factors from the point at which the scandal broke until it culminated in a candidate either winning reelection or failing to do so. Of the officials/candidates involved in the 62 scandals, 28 were reelected, 11 resigned, 11 dropped out of the race, 10 lost their next election, and two were removed from office. It is possible that some of these individuals might have retired regardless of the scandal. In these cases, a more comprehensive analysis was conducted to determine whether those who left office or dropped out did so because of the scandal. In particular, we looked for any indication that these individuals were not running for reelection (or higher office) before the scandal broke. If there was any talk about not running again, we left them out.[6]

From the data, we create two dependent variables, one measuring whether the politician survived, and one measuring the margin of victory at the subsequent election. The survival variable is coded as 1 for those who survived their next election and 0 otherwise (45 percent survived; see Table A1 in the Appendix). We also construct a margin of victory variable that takes the value of 0 for politicians who do not survive and ranges to 100 for the four who were unopposed in the next election ($m = 19.3$; $SD = 32.2$).[7] Given the distribution, we logged the variable, producing a range of 0 to 4.61 ($m = 1.43$; $SD = 1.82$).

The first independent variable, *gender*, is dummy-coded 1 for men and 0 for women (70 percent men; Table A1 in the Appendix). Our next independent variable, *years*, is the number of years the politician has been in a particular office, ranging from 0 to 26 years ($m = 7$; $SD = 6.6$). We also measure the *days between when the scandal broke and the next election*, which ranges from five to 1,372 days ($m = 348$; $SD = 332$).

In order to account for how partisanship and the safety of the political environment insulate politicians from the deleterious effects of scandals, we include the *percentage of the two-party vote in the previous election* for the party of the politician involved in the scandal in

[4]We considered including officials who had not yet faced a reelection, but this biases the results in favor of survival, since not all of them will indeed survive.
[5]Most of the coding involved objective categorization of the positions involved, location, charges, and so on. Therefore, a single coder was used. Multiple coders were used in the few cases requiring subjective judgments. We are confident that any error in the coding scheme is random.
[6]There was uncertainty in only a couple of cases, and inclusion/exclusion does not alter our substantive findings.
[7]We also considered a variable ranging from −100 to 100 that accounts for the magnitude of both a win or a loss. This variable proved problematic because of several candidates who remained on the ballot despite halting their campaigns or officially dropping out of the races. Since several of these candidates lost by substantial margins (>40 points), they bias the results.

the office of that official. Thus, our measure is specifically tailored to the office pertaining to the official involved in the scandal.[8] The variable ranges from 0 to 100 with a mean of 69 and standard deviation of 21. Additionally, we include a variable, *party congruence*, which takes a value of 1 if the official is of the same party as the dominant party identification in the state's electorate, and 0 otherwise (73 percent were congruent).[9]

The politician's initial response to the scandal is coded based on a review of the relevant articles, which allowed us to code whether he or she: (1) defended it aggressively (68 percent); (2) ignored it (21 percent); (3) shifted blame (3 percent); or (4) apologized (8 percent). We use dummy variables, coded 1 for using an *aggressive defense*, and 0 otherwise; *apology* is similarly coded if the politician apologized initially after the scandal broke.

For the nature of the scandal, we divided scandals into those that were sexual or financial in nature; we then aggregated remaining scandals into a category of general misconduct. We use dummies for *sexual* scandals (coded 0/1; 15 percent) and *financial* scandals (coded 0/1; 50 percent). (Nonsexual or nonfinancial scandals serve as the baseline.) We include two measures assessing support from the politician's spouse and from his or her political party. *Spousal support* is coded 1 if there is a record of the spouse defending the politician and 0 otherwise (5 percent). *Party support* is similarly coded (7 percent). We also include dummies for whether a *complaint* was filed against the office holder (50 percent) and whether or not the allegations resulted in an *indictment* (each coded 0/1; 18 percent). Finally, to measure the amount of news coverage generated, we include a relative measure of *news coverage*, which is computed by taking the number of articles that a scandal generated and dividing it by the number of days that the scandal was in the news. The variable ranges from 0.026 to 10.09 and has a mean of 0.9 and standard deviation of 1.72.[10]

## Findings

Most candidates were in an office in which they were seeking reelection, and only a few were seeking election for another office. Thirty-six percent of scandals involved state house candidates, 18 percent involved the U.S. House, 11 percent state senate seats, 8 percent ran for governor, and 5 percent sought a U.S. Senate seat. There were two each of mayoral candidates, attorneys general, superior court judges, and secretaries of state. We had one candidate each for district attorney, state supreme court, lieutenant governor, comptroller general, state auditor, and a member of a town board of supervisors. While the counts are small within some of these categories, we include all applicable elected officials involved in scandals that met our criteria in the states during the time period.[11]

We begin with an assessment of the odds of surviving a political scandal (Table 1). The first two models use a dichotomous, dependent variable of whether or not the politician survived the scandal, so they are estimated with logistic regression, and for ease of interpretation, we present the odds ratios. Model 1 examines how the following variables influence survival: gender, years in office, the number of days before an election that the scandal broke,

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[8]We considered using presidential vote margin, but it is more susceptible to influences of individual presidential candidates. Additionally, presidential vote data are not available for every district or municipality corresponding to the office of the official involved in the scandal. Since using presidential vote for a larger geographic area involves using a blunt instrument, we prefer the precision of using the percentage of the party vote for the office of each official involved in scandal.

[9]States are coded based on the majority party ID (of two parties) of voters in each state. It suggests that a Republican in Texas will be better protected than a Democrat, but it does ignore the fact that not all offices are state-wide. In conjunction with the previous vote margin measure, we believe we adequately capture how party influ-

TABLE 1

Odds of Survival

| Independent Variables | Model 1 | Model 2 |
|---|---|---|
| Men | 63.40* | 48.38* |
| | (118.02) | (81.41) |
| Years in Office | 1.1 | – |
| | (0.1) | |
| Days before election | 0.993* | 0.994* |
| | (0.003) | (0.003) |
| Previous party election percentage | 1.1* | 1.1** |
| | (0.05) | (0.04) |
| Party congruence | 45.48** | 21.71** |
| | (67.14) | (27.84) |
| Aggressive defense | 0.012* | 0.03* |
| | (0.024) | (0.05) |
| Apology | 0.0001* | 0.0003* |
| | (0.0000) | (0.001) |
| Spousal support | 431,345* | 38,292* |
| | (2,954,107) | (206,374) |
| Party support | 4.032 | – |
| | (8.00) | |
| Sexual | 0.00* | 0.00* |
| | (0.00) | (0.00) |
| Financial | 0.443 | – |
| | (0.505) | |
| Complaint | 0.015** | 0.037** |
| | (0.027) | (0.052) |
| Indictment | 0.0002** | 0.0004** |
| | (0.0003) | (0.001) |
| Relative news coverage | 1.436 | – |
| | (1.06) | |
| Constant | 0.04 | 0.04 |
| | (0.09) | (0.08) |
| Log likelihood | −16.42 | −17.79 |
| LR chi-square (14) and (10) | 52.54 | 49.79 |
| Prob>chi-squae | 0.000 | 0.000 |
| Pseudo $R$-square | 0.615 | 0.583 |
| BIC | 94.73 | 80.97 |
| $N$ | 62 | 62 |

NOTE: Models are logit estimates. Coefficients are odds ratios with standard errors in parentheses. ** $p <$ 0.01; * $p < 0.05$.

the previous party vote for that office, party congruence, whether there was an aggressive defense, whether there was an initial apology, spousal support, party support, whether the scandal was sexual in nature, whether it was financial in nature, whether there was a complaint filed, whether there was an indictment, and the amount of media coverage.[12]

ences the effect of scandals on political survival. We use Gallup data ⟨http://news.gallup.com/poll/203117/gop-maintains-edge-state-party-affiliation-2016.aspx⟩.

[10]We also considered the total amount of coverage, and the results were similar.

[11]We estimated our models with state fixed effects. The state dummies were not significant, and the substantive effect of the explanatory variables was similar to the models below. The same is true for office-level dummies.

FIGURE 1

Predictive Margins of Previous Election Results on Survival
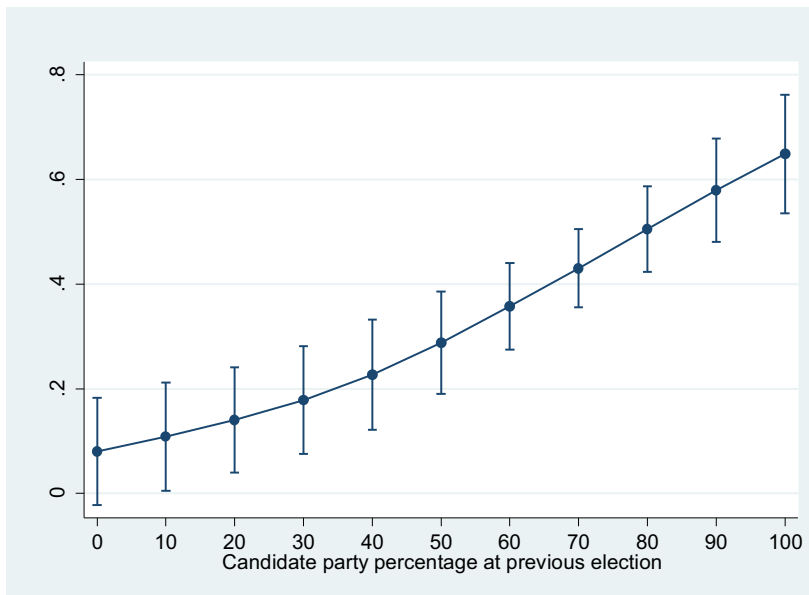


Model 2 excludes the number of years in office, party support, the financial scandal variable, and relative news coverage since these variables were either not significant or were collinear with other variables.

We begin with factors that increase the odds of survival. As predicted, men can expect to see an increase in the odds of surviving the scandal by 63 and 48, respectively (models 1 and 2) compared to women, holding other variables constant. We also estimate the previous party vote of the candidate for a given office to increase the odds of survival by 1 percent for each increase in the previous election margin. Figure 1 shows that the predicted margins of the previous election results on the probability of survival increase from about 8 percent to 65 percent over the range of the data, with the slope steepening for higher values of the variable. As expected, the odds of survival increase by about 45 in model 1 and 22 in model 2 for a politician whose party affiliation matches the dominant party in the state compared to one whose party affiliation does not match. Spousal support is expected to increase the odds of surviving a scandal, though the magnitudes are somewhat misleading since in only a few cases could we document spousal support, and in all but one case, the candidate survived. Notably, the years in office variable is not significant, but that is largely due to the moderate correlation between this variable and the previous party election margin ($r = 0.44$). When we remove the previous party margin variable, the odds of survival increase by about 15 percent for each year the candidate is in office.

[12] Several goodness-of-fit tests suggest that the model indeed fits the data well, though we also estimate a more parsimonious and better-fitting model (model 2). The Akaike information criterion (AIC) is 69.62 and the Bayesian information criterion (BIC) is 99.4, which are lower than a number of alternate specifications. A Hosmer-Lemeshow test also produces a $p$-value of nearly 0.99, which is desirable. Tests of sensitivity and specificity produce an area under the receiver operating characteristics (ROC) curve of over 0.95.

FIGURE 2

Predictive Margins of Days Before Election on Survival
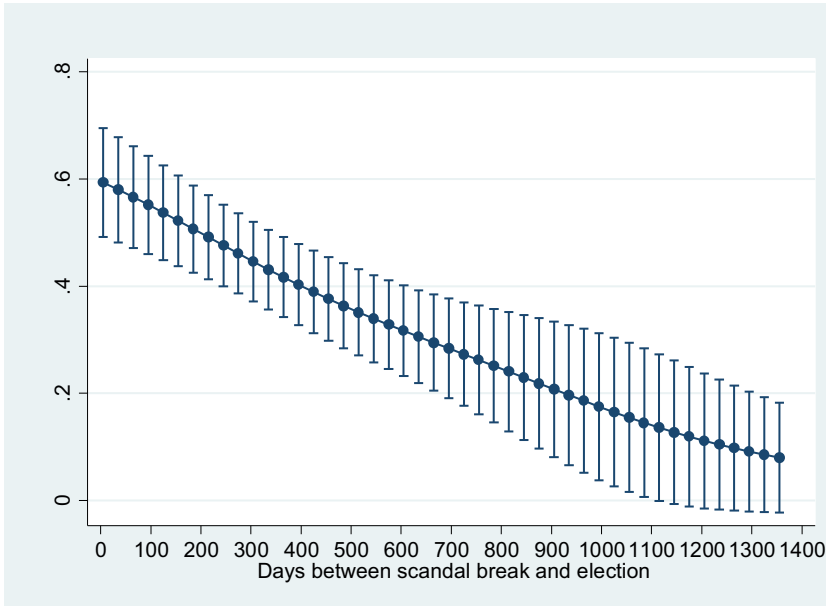


A number of factors decrease the odds of surviving a political scandal. For each day before the next election, we expect a decrease in the odds of survival by about 0.06 or 0.07 percent. This is a sizable reduction when we compare the scandal that broke only five days before the next election to one that broke 1,372 days before the election. Figure 2 presents the predictive margins for the days before the election on survival. We estimate that the probability of surviving a scandal decreases notably for scandals that break long before the next election, translating to about a 58 percent chance of survival for a scandal breaking within a month of the election, but only about 8 percent beyond 1,200 days.

Scandals that were sexual in nature decrease the odds of surviving, though financial scandals were no more likely to end electoral aspirations than the baseline category. We also computed the predicted probability of survival for each type of scandal. Financial scandals result in a probability of survival of just over 48 percent; however, for sexual scandals, the survival probability is only about 3 percent, adjusting for the other variables, which is significantly different from the baseline. As expected, both severity measures—complaints filed and indictments—decrease the odds of surviving scandals (Table 1). Politicians who utilize an aggressive defense of their alleged transgressions can expect to see a 97 to 99 percent reduction in the odds of surviving a scandal compared to those candidates who do not defend themselves ($p < 0.05$). For those apologizing, the likelihood of surviving is even smaller.

The above models examine the factors that affect whether or not a politician survives to win another election, but they do not examine the magnitude of the victory. Accordingly, we construct a variable that is coded 0 if the candidate lost and a positive value for the margin of victory if the candidate won. The data range from 0 to 100 with substantial zero inflation and individual positive frequencies for just under half the cases. Thus, we rely on a censored Tobit model to account for the fact that the dependent variable is constrained

TABLE 2

Explaining the Electoral Margin

| Independent Variables | Tobit | Marginal Effect Expected dy/dx |
|---|---|---|
| Men | 1.96* | 0.39* |
| | (1.01) | (0.19) |
| Days before election | −0.003• | −0.001• |
| | (0.002) | (0.000) |
| Previous party election percentage | 0.086*** | 0.018*** |
| | (0.024) | (0.005) |
| Party congruence | 1.62• | 0.32• |
| | (1.09) | (0.21) |
| Aggressive defense | −1.41 | −0.30 |
| | (1.05) | (0.23) |
| Apology | −2.5 | −0.46 |
| | (2.23) | (0.35) |
| Spousal support | 1.69 | 0.38 |
| | (2.11) | (0.49) |
| Sexual | −4.74** | −0.80*** |
| | (1.97) | (0.24) |
| Complaint | −0.94 | −0.2 |
| | (0.99) | (0.2) |
| Indictment | −4.42** | −0.77*** |
| | (1.56) | (0.21) |
| Constant | −5.04* | |
| | (2.15) | |
| Log likelihood | −75.48 | |
| LR chi-square(10) and (10) | 40.35 | |
| Prob>chi-squae | 0.000 | |
| Pseudo *R*-square | 0.21 | |
| *N* | 62 | |

NOTE: Equation (1) is a two-limit Tobit model with logged electoral margin as the dependent variable. The model is censored at 0 and 4.60517, which are the lowest and highest values of the logged dependent variable. Equation (2) computes the marginal effect y = E(y|0<y<4.60517). ***$p < 0.001$; **$p < 0.01$; *$p < 0.05$; • $p < 0.1$.

at 0 and 100. To address the distribution of the dependent variable, we take the natural log of the variable, which now ranges from 0.095 to 4.61, and recode the dropped zeros back to zero.[13]

The Tobit model estimates in Table 2 contain the same independent variables found in model 2 of the previous table. The coefficients are presented in column 1 and the marginal effects on the censored expected value (y = E(y|0<y<4.60517)) are presented in column 2. As anticipated, men are expected to win reelection by larger margins than women. The previous vote percentage also has a substantial positive influence on vote margin in subsequent elections ($p < 0.001$). Sexual scandals are expected to result in a smaller vote percentage in comparison to the baseline category. Indictments result in fewer expected votes compared to candidates who are not indicted; however, simply having a complaint filed does not influence vote margin. None of the variables assessing how the candidate handles the scandal appears to influence the margins at the next election.

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[13]We also employ a technique addressed by Cameron and Trivedi (2009) of "tricking" Stata into recoding zeros into values slightly lower than the lowest value on the dependent variable. The results are little different from what we report here.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

We began with the assertion that some things insulate candidates from the effects of scandals, and not surprisingly, party congruence with the dominant party in a state has a protective effect on politicians. This does not mean that a Democrat in a Democratic state is immune to a scandal's effects, as former New York Governor Elliot Spitzer (who resigned following a prostitution scandal) might agree, but it is suggestive that partisanship matters in the aggregate. Consistent with existing scholarship (Abramowitz, 1991; Silva, Jenkins-Smith, and Waterman, 2007), we find that candidates are insulated by, or vulnerable to, the political environment.

We note consistently strong effects of margin of victory in previous elections on the likelihood of surviving a scandal, as well as on the margin of victory for those who do survive. In 2014, Ronald Waters, Vanessa Brown, Michelle Brownlee, and Louise Bishop (members of the Pennsylvania State House) were implicated in a bribery sting. All four had won their previous elections with 100 percent of the vote, and despite allegations that each had taken money from the informant, all went into the following election unchallenged, retaining their seats (McCoy, Couloumbis, and Lin, 2014).[14] The relative safety of the contested seat appears to mitigate the deleterious effects of scandals. We did not address the quality of challengers in this article because the elected offices involved in the scandals were so varied that a reliable measure was not feasible. Quality challengers may decide to run when incumbents are involved in scandals, but this is likely dependent on the competitiveness of the office.

Our analyses suggest that men are more likely to survive political scandals than women, and when they do win, they do so by greater margins. We did interact gender with the different scandal types, but the results did not yield significant differences across comparison categories, possibly due to the small number of such cases. Still, the finding that men are more likely to survive and by increased margins may indicate a double standard in politics where men are not penalized to the same extent as women. Some transgressions may not comport with gender norms, and when the scandal violates these expectations, women pay a price that men do not.

The amount of time that passes appears to decrease the odds of surviving a political scandal. The mean number of days from the scandal breaking until the next election was 225 for those who survived and 449 for those who did not. As Praino, Stockemer, and Moscardelli (2013) note, there are enduring effects of scandals that can influence electoral results long after the incident takes place. Opponents are certain to continue to attack politicians, likely keeping the scandal salient; this has an enduring effect. In analyses not shown, we included dummy variables for the purported "October surprise" to examine any late-breaking scandals just prior to the election. In only a single case did a candidate lose when a scandal broke within 30 days of the election, and we found no aggregate effect of late-breaking scandals on survival or on vote margin. As the election draws near, there are simply few undecided voters left to influence.

Not surprisingly, the severity of political scandals decreases the odds of survival and has some influence on electoral margins. But, our findings also suggest that engaging in a strong defense or apologizing appears to decrease the odds of surviving a scandal. Perhaps politicians only apologize or engage in a strong defense of allegations against them when they realize that the scandal is substantial and believe failure to address the issue may allow

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[14]Pennsylvania Department of State, "2014 General Election," Pennsylvania Department of State, November 4, 2014. Available at ⟨http://philadelphia.cbslocal.com/2014/12/28/year-in-review-leanna-washington-resigns-from-office-after-pleading-guilty-to-felony-charge/⟩.

others to dictate the discussion. Conceivably, these techniques are used in situations where the politician's political career is indeed in jeopardy. We address this concern in two ways. The first is by examining whether using an aggressive defense or apology actually correlates with scandal severity. We have data on whether an investigation has been opened against the official, whether an ethics commission has issued any sanctions against the official, whether there has been a trial, and whether criminal sanctions were issued following the trial. None were statistically correlated with the use of an apology or aggressive defense. Second, we include an interaction term assessing the use of an aggressive defense when the allegations are serious enough to warrant an indictment, and the results suggest no interactive effect exists. Thus, we are not certain what leads candidates to strongly defend themselves against allegations of scandal, but when they do, they are less likely to survive politically. A strong defense is probably used when the candidate is most vulnerable, regardless of the severity of the scandal.

We did find that scandals that were sexual in nature were more likely to influence survival negatively. Of course, individual outcomes vary with regard to how scandals affect political careers. Former U.S. congressman, David Wu's (Oregon) political career ended within a couple of weeks following allegations that he made unwanted sexual overtures to the daughter of a donor (Seelye, 2011). However, Matt Wingard, another elected official from Oregon, was accused of sexually coercing a legislative aide who worked for him, yet he remained in office until the following election (Mapes, 2012).

In the aggregate, financial scandals do not appear to affect survival differently than other scandals; however, this may be related to the fact that several individuals involved in these scandals were in very safe elections. We estimated our survival and vote margin models excluding the cases where candidates won with over 90 percent of the vote, and the financial scandal dummy variable becomes marginally significant, and the model fits the data quite well. Specific examples of the inappropriate use of public funds and other resources yield divergent results when we look at individual cases. For example, LeAnna Washington, a former member of the Pennsylvania State Senate, resigned from office after facing federal conflict of interest charges stemming from accusations of using taxpayer money to perform personal political activities (Segall, 2014). However, when Minnesota Governor Mark Dayton allegedly used a state plane for political purposes (Stassen-Berger, 2014), he was able to remain in office and subsequently won the following election.[15] Overall, of the 31 cases involving financial scandals, 15 survived and 16 did not, which is not statistically different.

While spousal support mattered in predicting survival but not electoral margin, party support did not matter at all; we did find that the political parties were reluctant to support candidates embroiled in scandals. Parties acknowledged scandals in about 39 percent of our cases, but they only explicitly stated support for their candidate in regard to the scandal about 7 percent of the time. Parties likely attempt to distance themselves from tainted candidates so that the scandal does not have spillover effects.

Some factors (e.g., the economy) that determine the probability of survival are likely beyond a politician's control. Although not addressed in our models, we acknowledge that a strong economy may help a politician survive a scandal, and a poor economy is likely to make the subject of the scandal more vulnerable. However, economic prosperity is arguably only a partial and indirect explanation, and for some offices, probably irrelevant.

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[15]Office of the Minnesota Secretary of State, "Statewide Results for Governor & Lt Governor," Office of the Minnesota Secretary of State, November 18, 2014. Available at ⟨http://www.startribune.com/politics/statelocal/240665271.html⟩; ⟨http://electionresults.sos.state.mn.us/Results/Governor/20?officeInElectionId =5525⟩.

Silva, Jenkins-Smith, and Waterman, for example, demonstrate that although the economy had an indirect impact on President Clinton's approval ratings, "it is difficult to argue that the economy directly served to help Clinton survive the impeachment crisis" (2007:482). In our study, the relative short time period and varied political offices make comparable measures of the economy difficult, and in light of the Silva et al. findings, of debatable value.

Political skill can be beneficial to survivability, and charismatic candidates may likely weather political storms that others perhaps cannot. While we address whether officials apologized or strongly defended themselves, we cannot adequately capture the fact that some politicians are simply more adept at handling controversy. Presidents Reagan and Clinton each used their considerable political skills and charisma to help them survive serious scandals. Few politicians possess the political acumen of Reagan or Clinton, making reliance on charisma an uncertain strategy for those embroiled in scandal.

While our findings enhance understanding of the factors that contribute to survivability across many scandals, involving many officials, and in different settings, we do not suggest that every scandal will result in the same outcome. The 2016 presidential race, for example, presents a challenging opportunity for further analysis. Each of the major candidates faced scandals during their campaigns. Whether Hillary Clinton's scandals were viewed as more severe than the scandals associated with Donald Trump will fuel speculation for some time; our results are suggestive that Clinton may have been penalized because of her gender and because her scandals were long-lasting. Yet, this election defied conventional wisdom in myriad ways, including understanding the role of scandal in ending political careers. This continues to be an area ripe for further study, and early indications are that the Trump Administration will provide continuing examples for additional research.

## Appendix

### TABLE A1

Summary Statistics and Predicted Effects on Survival and Margin

| Variable | Mean | SD | Minimum | Maximum | Prediction |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Survival | 0.45 | 0.52 | 0 | 1 | − |
| Electoral percentage | 19.3 | 32.2 | 0 | 100 | − |
| lnElectoral margin | 1.44 | 1.82 | 0 | 4.605 | − |
| Gender (men = 1) | 0.71 | 0.46 | 0 | 1 | + |
| Years in office | 7 | 6.55 | 0 | 26 | + |
| Days until next election | 348.2 | 332.7 | 5 | 1,372 | − |
| Previous vote percentage | 0.69 | 0.21 | 0 | 1 | + |
| Party congruence | 0.73 | 0.45 | 0 | 1 | + |
| Aggressive defense | 0.68 | 0.47 | 0 | 1 | − |
| Apology | 0.08 | 0.27 | 0 | 1 | − |
| Spousal support | 0.05 | 0.22 | 0 | 1 | + |
| Party support | 0.07 | 0.25 | 0 | 1 | + |
| Sexual | 0.15 | 0.36 | 0 | 1 | − |
| Financial | 0.5 | 0.5 | 0 | 1 | − |
| Complaint | 0.5 | 0.5 | 0 | 1 | − |
| Indict | 0.18 | 0.39 | 0 | 1 | − |
| Relative news articles | 0.9 | 1.72 | 0.026 | 10.09 | − |

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