Political Scandals

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Abstract

This literature review is the first attempt to gather the existing knowledge we have about political scandals, with a particular focus on the political psychology literature. It is motivated by the widespread occurrences and the rising importance of scandals in shaping political events, and the corresponding (surprising) lack of attention by the academic community. While there is little empirical evidence of how scandals affect voters' behavior, we lack a theoretical systematization of the phenomenon. This review therefore has two main contributions: first, it provides a broad overview of the political science literature that has been treating scandals. Secondly, it imparts a formal framework to think about scandals that might be useful in guiding future empirical and theoretical work.

Keywords: Political Scandals, Motivated Reasoning, Bayesian Learning, Media Framing, Public Opinion

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1 Introduction

Scandals are a fundamental components of today's politics. In the US, presidential scandals came to play a fundamental role since the Watergate, when Nixon was forced to resign; Reagan and Clinton were seriously threatened by the Iran-Contra and Monica Lewinsky affairs respectively. Outside the US, examples abound as well: the Profumo-Keeler affair in UK led the Prime Minister to resign, the "Mani Pulite" (clean hands) operation caused a major change of Italian political institutions in the early 1990's, the Bettencourt affair in France put Nicolas Sarkozy at the center of criminal investigations over illegal donations. The list could continue for a long time. Political scandals shape political events, and have an impact on voters' opinions. Some scholars have hypothesized that the deterioration of citizens' political support observed in Western democracies during the past decades is connected with the increased number of political scandals (Thompson, 2013, Bowler and Karp, 2004).

Despite the importance of scandals, political scientists still lack an understanding of the determinants of scandals' outbreaks. Observational evidence suggests that scandals have a negative impact not only on politicians involved, but also on other politicians and the whole political system. Recent experimental evidence suggests that scandals indeed affect voters' behavior and preferences for politicians (Green et al., 2016). While the existing literature has been focusing mainly on political consequences of particular historical scandals, there are no consistent theories of the emergence of political scandals. I shall argue in this essay that a critical factor in explaining scandals' outbreak is the presence of political competition among parties, and necessarily free media outlets covering the scandalous news. This consideration is strategic in nature, as politicians have clear incentives to provide the media with insider information, and adds explanatory power to "cultural" explanations which associate scandals' occurrence to different political norms and values in different places. Moreover, politicians' incentives to report insider information to the media vary with different political institutions: if individual members can be replaced by voters' retention decision, it is easier to put a corrupt colleague in troubles than a situation where all party members are replaced simultaneously with elections, as in party list systems. This observation may lead to a set of interesting testable implications in a comparative institutional setting.

This essay is organized as follows. I begin by describing alternative mechanism through which voters react to political scandals, drawing from the political psychol-

ogy literature. Next, I outline two contrasting theories of political scandals and their theoretical predictions. The empirical evidence gathered from the literature is then presented in light of these theories. First, observational studies are described. Then, I describe experimental evidence from the laboratory and field. Finally, I propose a formal framework to conceptualize political scandals, and outline future research opportunities, especially in comparative politics.

2 How do voters react to scandals? Alternative mechanisms

In the political psychology field, there are two main alternative mechanisms through which voters might react to political scandals, *Motivated Reasoning* and *Bayesian Learning*. The motivated reasoning literature suggests that when processing information, people are biased by directional goals. Following the motivated reasoning perspective, people should selectively process information contained in scandal news that enables them to arrive at conclusions that are congenial to their private views. Alternatively, Bayesian learning models propose that people process information rationally by using the laws of probability to update their prior beliefs. Following these models, people might arrive at "congenial" conclusions not because of bias in information selection, but simply because, given their prior beliefs, an unbiased Bayesian updating process leads to those posterior beliefs.

I conclude this section with a discussion of "framing effects", which occur when small changes in the way an issue is presented cause public opinion to shift a lot. This discussion is important, because the way media frame scandals clearly affects how voters (readers) react to the same piece of evidence. Throughout the section, I provide suggestions for future research based on the evidence that we have from these more mature literatures.

2.1 Motivated Reasoning and Selective Exposure

Motivated reasoning refers to the unconscious tendency of individuals to fit their processing of information to conclusions that suit some end or goal. In their important seminal contribution, Lord et al. (1979) find that people examine empirical evidence in a biased manner. Subjects in their study were asked to complete a questionnaire on capital punishment: half of them were proponents and the other

half were opponents. Their study shows that subjects tend to easily accept evidence, as long as it is in line with their original opinion, whereas they subject to critical evaluation evidence that goes against their prior. As a result, providing the same piece of evidence to contending factions leads to an increase in polarization, rather than encouraging agreement. In an influential review, Kunda (1990) divides the motivated reasoning phenomena into two major categories: those in which the motive is to arrive to an *accurate* conclusion, regardless of what it might be, and those in which the motive is to arrive at a *particular* conclusion. For what concern reasoning driven by accuracy goals, Payne et al. (1988) show that when people are more motivated to be accurate, they expend more cognitive effort on issue-related reasoning and attend to relevant information more carefully (see also Simon (1957) and Beach and Mitchell (1978)). Harkness et al. (1985) provide another instance of biased selection of evidence, finding that accuracy goals make people more accurate. On the other hand, the basic idea of motivated reasoning driven by directional goal is that people try to construct a convincing justification of their desired conclusion, still trying to be rational. For example, in Lord et al. (1979) subjects motivated to disbelieve the evidence are less likely to believe it. As a result, people can process information in depth and be differentially sensitive to its strengths and weaknesses and yet be biased at the same time.

An interesting replication of Lord et al. (1979) applied to scandals would test two main hypotheses. The first is whether subjects would rate the probative evidence of scandals aligned to their party identification more highly than scandal against their ID. The second hypothesis would be that scandals confirming subjects' view would exert a greater impact than scandals disconfirming those views. Moreover, an improvement over the original study would take advantage of a between subject design, rather than a within subject where they asked subjects to report the cumulative changes in their attitude since the beginning of the experiment. Asking subjects whether they changed opinion, without providing a treatment-control comparison, might lead subjects not to report real shifts in attitudes, but just reporting what they believed to be a rational or appropriate response to each increment in the available evidence. In a more recent paper, Taber and Lodge (2006) improve over Lord et al. (1979)'s subjective outcome measure by introducing a between subject design. The authors find evidence of a prior attitude effect: people who feel strongly about an issue tend to evaluate supportive arguments as stronger and more compelling than opposing arguments. In addition, they find that subjects exert a

lot of effort in dismissing what they do not agree with. Finally, there is evidence of selective exposure, i.e. the tendency of seeking arguments that confirm people's original views. Even if the experiment represents an improvement with respect to Lord et al. (1979)'s subjective outcome measures, the design is still not very clean, as subjects are assigned to two different conditions which entail many different tasks and there is no clear treatment and control condition. Moreover, this represents another test on undergraduates for issues that might critically differ with subjects that have more firm beliefs, and who have been exposed to different arguments for a longer time than students in their early twenties. Borrowing some of the hypotheses in Taber and Lodge (2006) and applying them to the context of political scandals, it would be interesting to see whether people put a lot of effort in dismissing scandalous evidence that goes against politicians they support, or whether they choose to be exposed to information that confirms their prior arguments about political figures. Moreover, it would be interesting to see whether these effects are more or less prominent when considering political activists, as it was done in a recent field experiment conducted in the US by Green et al. (2016).

2.2 Bayesian Learning

In contrast with the motivated reasoning paradigm, the Bayesian perspective suggests that voters process information in a rational manner when facing new evidence. According to this perspective, subjects may arrive at the same "preferred" conclusion not because they are motivated to do so, but because - given prior beliefs and evidence at hand - that conclusion is the result of an unbiased inference process which combines new evidence with prior beliefs.

This process can be formalized as follows: suppose a voter has certain prior beliefs about honesty of a politician, and let's denote honesty by θ. Suppose that voters believe that θ is distributed as a Normal with the following parameters: $\theta \sim \mathcal{N}(m, \sigma_\theta^2)$.

Now, suppose voters read about a scandal involving the politician: in the Bayesian framework, this amounts to receiving a signal about our underlying parameter of interest θ. We can denote this signal by: $s = \theta + \epsilon$ with $\epsilon \sim \mathcal{N}(0, \sigma_\epsilon^2)$.

Bayesian updating on the true value of θ now takes a particularly convenient form. Voters' posterior beliefs are that θ is distributed normally with mean $m = \lambda s + (1 - \lambda)m$ and variance $\sigma^2 = \lambda \sigma_\epsilon^2$, where $\lambda = \frac{\sigma_\theta^2}{\sigma_\theta^2 + \sigma_\epsilon^2}$. Intuitively, the greater the

initial uncertainty about honesty of the politician (i.e the greater the variance σ_θ^2), the more weight voters will put on the scandal when they have to decide how to process information (i.e. the higher λ will be). On the other hand, when voters are almost sure about θ beforehand, they will discard evidence of the scandal (indeed, as $\sigma_\theta^2 \to 0$, $\lambda \to 0$ as well).

This intuition is confirmed by experimental data: Green et al. (2016) provide evidence that at low levels of prior uncertainty, the effect of providing newspaper news covering scandals is very close to zero. On the other hand, when there is more uncertainty - in particular, when three out of four respondents provide a "don't know" response, predicted treatment effects on voter's opinion are 8 percentage points (with a 90 percent confidence interval ranging from 4 to 12 percentage points).

This brief review can help readers understanding what are the substantive implications of a Bayesian learning model and how it differs from the previous model of motivated reasoning.

Fischle (2000) brings to the data these two alternative models to understand which one explains better pubic response to the Lewinsky scandal. Predictions for public reaction to this (or any) presidential scandal differ according to the two theories. The motivated reasoning explanation predicts that voters weight evidence (importance of the allegations against the president) differently according to their prior affect. In contrast, according to the Bayesian learning model voters should move in the same direction and to the same extent, as long as the level of prior information is the same. To test these different predictions, the study takes advantage of a random sample of adults in North Carolina, who were interviews before and after the first revelation of the Lewinsky affair. According to the author, this approach 'enables to examine directly the manner in which public support responded to the scandal'. As for the methodological issues presented by the paper, we should notice first that the survey response rate is of 35 percent in the first wave, which clearly posits problems as respondents might have characteristics that are correlated with their global impression of the president (the outcome variable). Secondly, it is not clear to what extent a sample of North Carolina respondents is representative of the entire population of voters at the national level. Nevertheless, Fischle's piece provides an original analysis of the data and confrontation of the two alternative hypotheses. Results show that among those who disliked the president, the credibility assigned to the allegations raised perceived importance of the scandal by 69 percentage points, whereas among Clinton's supporters, credibility actually dimin-

ished their perceived importance by 23 percentage points. This result is in line with a motivated reasoning perspective: the more certain detractors are that allegations are true, the more weight they should put on the misconduct. On the other hand, Clinton's supporters should dismiss the importance of scandalous events as evidence becomes more certain. The author concludes that the evidence presented supports the motivated reasoning perspective, rather than a Bayesian learning model, as supporters and detractors reacted in a very different way.

Although this piece presents some methodological issues, it is an interesting test of two competing models to understand the effect of scandals on voters' behavior. Given the importance of scandals in today's politics, I expect to see many more discussions of this sort, and I hope to see many more attempts to test what different theories provide as explanation of the mechanism through which voters update in the event of a scandal.

2.3   Does Framing Matter?

The framing effect refers to a particular cognitive bias, which happens when individuals presented with the same information react differently to it, depending on how it is presented. In public opinion research, "framing effects" occur when small changes in the way an issue is presented cause opinion of the public to change a lot (Chong and Druckman, 2007).

It is natural to think of media as the quintessential agent interested in framing effects, especially for what concerns scandals. Columnists take small incidents and blow them up into campaign crises. If the story is contrary to factual expectations it is a scoop, but if a story is contrary to ethical expectations, it is a scandal. And that is worth even more than a mere scoop. According to Sabato (1991), framing of news is pervasive in nowadays journalism:

> It has become a spectacle without equal in modern American politics: the news media, print and broadcast, go after a wounded politician like sharks in a feeding frenzy. The wounds may have been self-inflicted, and the politician may richly deserve his or her fate, but the journalists now take center stage in the process, creating the news as much reporting it, changing both the shape of election-year politics and the contours of government. (1991, p.1)

Consider the Lewinsky affair, which is a very good instance of this "feeding frenzy".

Many researchers in the area of framing would have suggested that Clinton would have fallen after the interpretation of events depicted by the media. The puzzle of how Clinton could survive, retaining high job performance ratings, is explained by Zaller (1998) as an example of victory of political substance over media hype: the media had little overall effect on Clinton's support and the public "focused on a bottom line consisting of peace, prosperity, and moderation"(p.186).

On the other hand, research shows that, at least in the short term, different media frames have an impact on viewers/readers attitude towards the subject at hand (Nelson et al., 1997). Framing effects occur when speakers (or writers) put a lot of emphasis on certain aspects of events and not others (Druckman, 2001). In most studies of framing effects in the laboratory, subjects are only presented with one frame and do not have the possibility to interact with other people. Conclusions of such studies are substantially meaningful if we believe that "passively" receiving information framed in a certain way is a factor that might change public opinion by itself. If we think of scandals as a media framing device, though, there is an active component that is very fundamental. When a news is really scandalous, everybody talks about it. Interpersonal conversations are clearly important factors for the outbreak of a scandal, and their influence on public opinion should be considered at least as important as the influence of the elite (media).

In a very original study, Druckman and Nelson (2003) study how interpersonal conversations affect elite influence on opinions. The brilliant contribution of this study comes from the observation that most political opinions are derived from a combination of elite influence *and* interpersonal conversation. Consequently, they study how these two factors interact by introducing a discussion treatment, in which people are allowed to confront their opinions on the article received (framed as "free speech" or "special interests"). Results suggest a much more limited impact for elites (i.e. "passive" framing effect) than previously thought, pointing at interpersonal conversation as an important mechanism for public opinion change. We might think of an application of this experiment to the understanding of how news about scandals affect the public opinion. The idea goes as follows: imagine to give subjects in the control group information about some politician's misdeed, and ask them to evaluate the politician before and after they receive the information. If we allowed for a discussion among subjects in the treatment group, after having read the same news, we could identify the effect of being exposed to interpersonal conversation on subjects' opinion. The relevance of this "active" mechanism seems to be very

important in scandals' outbreaks, as it is natural to confront and talk about such news with everybody, which in turns increases the magnitude of the news even more. One important issue that remains unanswered in Druckman and Nelson (2003) is what are the characteristics of framing that end up being more effective in persuading.

Chong and Druckman (2007) provide an answer to this question, with a very rich design which shows many big gaps in the previous literature. The experiment is a $2x3$ design which varies strength and relative frequencies of frames. Despite the risk of being confusing because of the seventeen conditions subjects could be assigned to, the study is valuable and engaging. Results show that framing effects depend more on strength than frequency, even though it is still not clear what strong frames are. One might argue that to repeat frames only twice (as in the study) is not enough to understand the effect of repetition. For instance, it is reasonable to think that one of the ways through which scandals stick in people's heads is by continuous repetition in the news. In order to understand whether repetition plays a role in this case, a proper design should include multiple repetitions to track at what stage people eventually update in the direction of the media framing effect.

Finally, it is worth discussing from a theoretical standpoint what is the effect of framing versus simply providing information. Is it really possible to understand the framing effect in a setting where subjects are asked to evaluate political facts? Framing by itself always introduce new information, and the salience (or strength) of framing is hard to disentangle from the informational content it carries. This is one instance where experimental economics might help understanding what is the effect of salience of a news separately from its informational content. By providing subjects in the laboratory with plain information about some state of the world (which lacks any type of political connotation), to which subjects attribute a payoff value, and by altering salience of reception of the same information, the pure effect of salience is identifiable. Consider, for instance, the case in which subjects receive the same signal about an underlying state of the world in both control and treatment group, but in the treatment the informational content is made more salient (visually, for example). In this case, Bayesian updators should process the two pieces of information in the same way, and a different response of treated subjects could be attributed to the effect of pure saliency (or framing) of the message. The experimental economics literature is outside the scope of this review, but recently there have been articles that treat the topic of saliency and its effect on information aggregation games, see

Kawamura and Vlaseros (2013) for an example.

3   Do Scandals affect voters?

Politicians' reputation is threatened by scandals. When reputation is compromised, politicians' career is in danger. There are two opposing views of how negative outcomes on politicians in turn might affect the political system, and they entail very different predictions about consequences for citizens' political support. I shall call them functional and dysfunctional theories of scandals. In what follows I first lay out the theoretical predictions of these two theories, and then analyze empirical evidence from the literature.

3.1   Theoretical Predictions

If political scandals are dysfunctional, it means that violations of norms and values compromise politicians involved in a scandal and other politicians as well. In contrast, functional theories would lead us to expect that reputation of those politicians not involved in a scandal would be unaffected, and we should also expect more favorable evaluations for some of the politicians who are not involved in the scandal - especially in the opposing parties. There is evidence that some political scandals damage the image of politicians involved in them, and go also beyond: for example, because of Watergate many Americans lose faith in institutions and especially in government (Bergesen and Warr, 1979, Lipset and Schneider, 1983), many Republicans seemed to express weaker party identification (Chaffee and Becker, 1975, Dunlap and Wisniewski, 1978, Robinson, 1974) and public opinion becomes more critical towards politicians (Lipset and Schneider, 1983, Abramson, 1983). This evidence manifests outside the US boundaries as well: for evidence from Italy, see Della Porta (2000) and from the U.K., Bowler and Karp (2004). According to the dysfunctional theory, political scandals affect negatively all political parties. Confederates of the same party are hit because they rarely criticize in an open manner their colleagues who are subject to scandals. But also other parties' members are affected: when citizens hear about some politicians' misdeeds, the party system as a whole is affected. Lastly, also institutions are negatively undermined, because voters perceive them as more corrupt and not effective in preventing wrongdoings.

Whereas the two theories agree on the (negative) effect that scandals have on the evaluation of the politician responsible for the breach of public trust, predictions vary

substantially for the consequences for citizens' political support of other politicians and parties, as well as for the institutional system as a whole. We can formulate two contrasting hypotheses for deriving theoretical predictions:

> *Functional theory hypothesis*: political scandals have either no impact or positive impact on all others political parties
>
> *Dysfunctional theory hypothesis*: political scandals have a negative impact on the evaluation of other politicians and other parties

For what concerns the political system as a whole, the dysfunctional theory assumes again that a political scandal has a negative effect, because of the breach of public trust is too hard to recover after the facts occur. On the other hand, it might be that the uncovering of political scandals and punishment of involved politician responsible proves that institutions function the way they should. As a consequence, the overall support for institutions and political system as a whole is reinforced. This is the core idea behind the functional theory of political scandals, which is indebted to Durkheim's account of religion. In our modern mediated world, scandal is a secularized form of sin (Thompson, 2013). Just as religion serves as a reinforcing cohesion of social groups with its practices, scandals serve to reinforce the norms that are the fundamental basis of our democratic institutions. Also for this outcome we have two contrasting hypotheses:

> *Functional theory hypothesis*: political scandals have a positive impact on the evaluation of institutions and the whole political system
>
> *Dysfunctional theory hypothesis*: political scandals have a negative impact on the evaluation of institutions as well as the political system in general

The dysfunctional theory has been challenged by its counterpart that interprets the same political scandals in a different way and leads to different predictions.

According to the *functional theory*, the effects of scandals are not always dysfunctional but can also have useful outcomes. When misconduct leads to scandals, citizens see that elites cannot violate rules without being sanctioned. As Thompson (2013) puts it, in our modern mediated world scandal is a secularized form of sin. Drawing a parallel with Durkheim's account of religion (Durkheim, 2002), as much as religious practices serve to reaffirm the values and beliefs of certain social groups,

scandals serve as a purification device, reaffirming the social order and - by condemning the transgressor - absolving everyone else. In line with the functional theory, Dunham and Mauss (1976) and Sniderman et al. (1975) claim that the Watergate led part of the electorate to support the political system. The interpretation given to the event is that those voters with the weakest bond to the leaders in 1973 had some faith restored in the system, when that system rejected the most reprehensible leaders.

3.2   Empirical Evidence

This section analyses the evidence that we have about the effect that scandals have on voters. There are only a few studies providing evidence on how voters react to scandals, and almost no field experiment about the topic. Nevertheless, the evidence collected provides an opportunity to interpret what we have in light of the theories outlined above, and to point out opportunities for future research. The section excludes evidence of the effect of scandals on politicians' behavior (except for some field experiments on corruption at the end of the section) and is organized by methodology. First, evidence from observational studies is reported. Then, we consider experimental evidence: a few laboratory experiments find consistent results that voters express less favorable evaluations of politicians involved in scandals. Finally, we turn to field experiments. While there are only two recent field experiments which study scandals, we are going to take into account a recent comparative experimental literature about the effect of corruption on voters. Most of the papers analyzed across different methodologies seem to support the dysfunctional theory of scandals. Nevertheless, evidence is too scarce to derive meaningful conclusions, and ultimately we need further studies to be able to make conclusive inference.

3.2.1   Observational Data

It has been observed that voters tend to punish politicians connected to scandals. Evidence comes from developed democracies, in the United States (Peters and Welch, 1980, Abramowitz, 1988, Jacobson and Dimock, 1994, Hirano and Snyder Jr, 2012), U.K. (Pattie and Johnston, 2012) and Italy (Chang et al., 2010), and developing democracies (Ferraz and Finan, 2007). In addition to the negative effect on individual politicians involved, there is evidence that scandals lead voters to trust less the government and institutions, and government approval drops. In this re-

gard, Bowler and Karp (2004) used ANES data to examine the effects of the House bank overdraft scandal on respondent support of the incumbent, and of Congress as a whole. In 1991, it was found that during a 39 months period 20,000 checks were written against member House bank accounts for which there were insufficient funds. The House bank was covering the overdrafts, and members of Congress were essentially receiving interest free loans, abusing of this privilege. In this case, the dysfunctional theory would predict that being aware of a congressman writing checks without having sufficient funds should erode trust in the specific congressman and in political institutions overall. In contrast, the functional theory would predict that the impact of the scandal will be at most confined to the specific congressman involved, and that there will be no spillover effects into institutions in general. The paper provides some evidence in favor of the dysfunctional theory: the percentage of respondents who "strongly disapprove" the representative involved in the scandal increased from 4 to 12 percentage points, when the number of checks increased from 0 to the maximum of 697, holding fixed all other variables such as education, age, sex, race, attention to campaign. Moreover, hearing about the scandal increased strong disapproval of Congress as a whole from 30 to 45 percentage points. These effects seem to be strong if compared to other factors that are usually identified as determinants of citizens' view of Congress, considered in the paper. These effects are more in line with the dysfunctional theory prediction than the functional, as they show that institutions overall are undermined by the event of a scandal.

As further evidence outside the US, Chang et al. (2010) look at re-election rates of members of the Italian parliament from 1948 to 1994. They find no evidence that charges of corruption decrease the likelihood that a deputy will be listed as a candidate in the subsequent election. Moreover, voters do not respond to allegations of corruption, as until the early 1990's the probability of reelection remains the same, regardless of corruption allegations. The authors argue that, in the early 1990's, massive press coverage of the Mani Pulite scandal led voters to react to political corruption, which was not the case without substantial media coverage. Isolating the effects of media coverage on public attitudes is challenging though, since media coverage is itself a strategic decision that may be influenced by perceptions of the public's demand for information [1]. Another observational study considers six congressional elections between the years 1968 through 1978, and codes all the in-

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[1]Later in this section we will cover some laboratory experiments which have addressed this problem by presenting subjects with fictional accounts of politicians' wrongdoing.

stances where corruption accusations had a big impact in election campaigns (Peters and Welch, 1980). The type of corruption charge was coded into a sevenfold classification, and the most common charges were campaign violations, for which they report 26 cases. The main dependent variable is predicted Democratic vote in current election, and the explanatory variable of interest is whether the case was one of a corruption allegation or not. They find that Congressional candidates accused of corruption are re-elected at high rates, but the presence of a scandal is associated with a $6 - 11$ percentage points decrease in vote share. Moral offenses appear to be punished more severely than any misdeeds involving money. This last result is present also in Welch and Hibbing (1997), who find that incumbents charged with corruption involving questions of morality could see their support diminish by as much as 10% of the two party vote.

The view suggesting an automatic deterioration of political variables such as citizens' support has been challenged by the alternative functional theory, which suggests that scandals do not always have a negative impact but might also have useful outcomes. There is some evidence for this alternative view, provided by some studies on the Watergate: Dunham and Mauss (1976) report that for at least part of the electorate there was an increase in support for the political system (see also Sniderman et al. (1975)).

Overall, observational data seem to suggest that the effect of political scandals on citizens' political attitudes is small and predominantly statistically insignificant. Nevertheless, as Zaller (2002) suggests, we should not put much weight on evidence from cross-national surveys. With his methodological contribution, he reports a statistical power analysis of media exposure effects in American presidential election campaigns. Monte Carlo simulations show that the majority of election studies do not have enough statistical power to detect exposure effects.

aaaaa We now turn to the analysis of the few experimental studies of political scandals.

3.2.2 Experimental Evidence

Lab experiments fictional accounts of politicians' wrongdoing find consistent results that voters express less favorable evaluations of politicians involved in scandals. In a study carried out in 1997, Carlson et al. (2000) examine the effects of type of scandal and sex of candidates on the public's perception of scandals. Her study uses a

3x2 experimental design which changes the sex of politician involved in the scandal and the type of scandal (either sexual or financial or none). As dependent variable, subjects were asked to rate 14 candidate traits, an unusually high number. These traits can be summarized into two main categories: character and competence of the candidate. Subjects were 150 students, who were presented newspaper clippings and candidate evaluations which varied the gender of candidate and presence of scandal (as well as the type, if in the scandal treatment). Both scandals and gender significantly affected the character score. Scores on the "competence" dependent variable were not significantly affected by either scandal or gender. The most interesting result of this study is that candidates got lower scores for financial scandals. The author claims that her study demonstrates that voters may evaluate political candidates differently according to the type of scandal in which the candidate was involved, as this passage from the paper highlights:

> *Long before the Clinton/Lewinsky scandal, a CBS/New York Times poll from January 1988 found that 80 percent of registered voters considered cheating on taxes something the public was entitled to know about a presidential candidate, while just 28 percent thought having been unfaithful to his wife was something the public was entitled to know.*

To make a more recent example, if we try to infer voters' preferences from the way they reacted to scandals in light of the recent 2016 election, we might think they discounted more Trump sexual scandals, hitting the candidate's character, than Hillary's email scandal, hitting competence, or at least what it was perceived to be competence by most of the electorate opposing her. If people care about candidate's performance in office, and they believe financial integrity is more relevant to that end than sexual integrity, then it is reasonable to observe such results.

In another related study about scandal and character traits, Funk (1996) uses an experiment to show that inferences made about candidates' trait quality have a causal impact on the overall evaluation of the candidate. In the context of her experiment, scandals are 'publicized behaviors by a politician that are in conflict with society's moral standards'. She chose as independent variables the respondents perceived trait inferences of a candidate and the type of scandal (financial or sexual). She had respondents read candidate descriptions, which stressed either qualities of competence or qualities of warmth, and record their impressions in order to determine if the respondents had, indeed, caught on to the trait inferences implied in

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her descriptions. After respondents had recorded their impressions, she distributed information that detailed the candidates involvement in a financial scandal, a sex scandal, or no scandal at all. Her research found that scandal had a less negative impact on candidates who were judged highly competent rather than highly warm, and that financial scandals had a more negative impact on candidates than did sex scandals. Even though it seems hard to extrapolate from undergrads evaluations of fictitious politicians what would real voters do in the electoral process, this paper highlights a critical factor that should be tested in the field: how perception of competence help explaining why some politicians are able to retain high support even after being involved in scandals. As mentioned in Funk (1996), despite being involved in several scandals, president Clinton tended to put emphasis on his competence in dealing with the economy, rather than his charismatic personality and warm traits.

Differently from the experimental studies analyzed above, which consider fictitious politicians, Garrett and Wallace (1976) reports questionnaire data which report opinion about Nixon's involvement in the Watergate scandal, during the months in which the scandal was exploding. Students from a psychology class were asked to rate on a seven-point scale whether they believed Nixon knew of the Watergate, whether he should be impeached and removed from office, and the extent to which they felt distressed about the Watergate. Students who had voted for Nixon in the 1972 Presidential election tended to minimize more the likelihood of President Nixon being involved in the scandal and reported being less distressed by it than did McGovern voters. This study is hardly informative, in that students were not administered any treatment and the finding that Nixon supporters tend to minimize the Watergate is not particularly remarkable. In addition, subjects were a few students enrolled in an introductory psychology class, which presents some external validity issues for the outcome of interest.

Overall, evidence from laboratory experiments suggests that scandals have an impact on subjects' opinion, but this evidence is not substantially informative of how voters would actually react when facing real scandals involving real politicians. To understand better the effect of scandals on politicians we need field experiments, which have not been done yet, with the exception of Green et al. (2016) and Maier (2010). These two studies have different targets and methodologies.

Maier (2010) proposes a methodological approach to evaluate the impact of political scandals which is alternative to both laboratory experiments and observational

studies using survey data. In the paper he argues that the problem of studies using survey data, among others, is that they do not explain how information is processed and evaluated by respondents. His alternative is a field experiment carried out in Bavaria, Germany, leveraging on a real political affair happened in 2004. The scandal involved the Minister of Education, accused of being involved in manipulation of inner-party elections. The study is comprised of a two-wave survey of 300 voters (only 272 of the original subjects were re-surveyed in the second wave). The treatment was administered in the second wave. Participants were randomly given a fictitious newspaper article about the scandal involving the Minister, immediately before the second wave survey. The article indicated that the scandal was more severe than thought. The control group was assigned an article that did not contain any accusatory information. Results show that voters assigned to the treatment group who read the scandal article had less favorable opinion of political figures in the scandal than voters assigned to the control group. More interestingly, results show that exposure to scandal information lead to a decline in evaluation of all political parties, and not just the one to whom the Minister belonged. Most of the observed declines are statistically significant. This result suggests that exposure to scandal information tends to damage all political parties, which is in line with predictions from the dysfunctional theory - and against those of the functional theory.

Green et al. (2016) provide a contribution to the vast literature of the effects of mass media on voters' behavior (see Zaller (1992), Gerber et al. (2009, 2011), Hill et al. (2013)), by showing how voters' evaluation of public officials change as they are exposed to media news containing information on scandals. The field experiment was conducted between 2014 and 2015 in a Southern state, and it was comprised of four experiments. In each of these four experiments, participants received a newspaper with a different scandal, either about university, or policy reform, or school reform. In addition, newspapers were mailed to two groups of voters: frequent voters and activists (delegates to the state Republican Convention). This is an interesting feature of the experiment, because it allows to see whether activists, who have a greater prior knowledge of politics, are less influenced by information provided by newspapers. Another feature of this experiment which is worth mentioning is the fact that there is a gap of seven days between the intervention and outcomes' measurement. Consequently, the treatment effect found represent a measure of the newspaper coverage impact on voters' behavior which is better than what is usually

found in the literature, as treatment effects found for survey experiments about media exposure usually decline within a week Coppock (2016). As for the experiments findings, results show that the newspapers increased the percentage of voters who believed 'corruption was widespread' at the local university (in the first of the four experiments) and lowered voters' trust in state government 'to do what is right'. Moreover, newspapers shifted voters' favorability of political figures connected to the scandal described in the predicted direction in 10 out of 10 cases. Finally, voters' and activists' estimated treatment effects are highly correlated. These results are in line with the dysfunctional theory of the effect of political scandals.

Although different from the conceptualization of scandal in this review, evidence of the effect of releasing information about incumbent corruption is closely related to scandals. In what follows I report the experimental evidence that the literature has provided so far about the effect of corruption information on voters.
In a field experiment conducted in Mexico before the 2009 election, Chong et al. (2015) randomly assign voting precincts to a campaign spreading information on corruption and public expenditure, by distributing fliers door-to-door. In the "corruption information" treatment group, the flier included information of the amount of resources spent by the mayor in a corrupt manner. The control group received no information, whereas the two placebo group received neutral information on budget and poverty expenditure. They find that the corruption-information treatment leads to a 1.3 percentage points (standard errors equal to 0.32 percentage points) decrease in turnout. Moreover, information about corruption leads to a 0.43 percentage points ($se = 0.2$ pp) in the incumbent parties' votes and a 0.86 percentage point ($se = 0.26$ pp) decrease in challengers' votes. These results seem to support the dysfunctional theory's predictions: as voters are exposed to corruption, they lose trust in government and are less likely to turnout. Moreover, in a corrupt environment, challengers are seen as corrupt as well, and therefore information about corruption tend to decrease the support of challenger candidates as well. This evidence is at odds with predictions from retrospective voting models according to which information about incumbents' involvement in corruption should help challengers by shifting votes towards them (Manin et al., 1999). Further evidence from comparative field experiments points in the same direction. Humphreys and Weinstein (2012) randomly select sites in Uganda where voters are given information on the performance of Members of Parliament. They show that providing information

does not have any effect on Members of Parliament's performance nor their reelection rates, even if they know about information being provided to voters. Banerjee et al. (2010) primed voters in rural India not to vote for corrupt candidates, finding that the treatment has no effects on turnout or incumbent vote share. This result contrasts with a study done in Delhi a couple of years later (Banerjee et al., 2011), in which the treatment (report cards on legislature attributes and performance) resulted in an average treatment effect of 3.6 percentage point increase in voter turnout. De Figueiredo et al. (2011) conducted a field experiment during the 2008 mayoral run-off election in Sao Paulo, the financial heart of Brazil, exploiting the fact that both candidates running for election were tainted by corruption convictions. They randomly distributed 187, 177 fliers informing voters in the vicinity of 200 voting locations about the corruption convictions. They find that the flier for one of the candidates (center-left) had a negative 1.2 percent average treatment effect on voter turnout, which is a surprising result given that voting is mandatory in Brazil. Finally, Malesky et al. (2012) find no evidence that randomly increased transparency improves delegate performance in Vietnam.

4   Discussion: Towards a New Theory of Scandals

While we can find studies of particular political scandals - for example, Watergate or the Monica Lewinsky affair in the United States - we still lack a proper theoretical characterization which put scandals in the broad context of political structures and strategic behavior of the actors involved. Despite its explanatory potential, the very concept of "scandal" lacks scholarly acceptance. This might be explained by the fact that scholars in political science are too engaged in studying "important" topics such as elections, wars or revolutions, and consider scandals as transitory and trivial events which are not worth any formal analysis. The study of political scandals provides an opportunity to compare and to evaluate features of different political systems. As Lowi (1998) puts it, 'politics under condition of scandal is comparable to cells under the microscope. Scandals, in other words, are a useful exaggeration of reality'. While scandals *per se* are relatively short, their consequences are long-lasting and important for political institutions (consider, for example, the aftermath of the Watergate in US or the Profumo affair in UK).

It is worth to delve deeper into a proper theoretical characterization that helps to shed light on the puzzling occurrence of political scandals. In particular, while

much attention has been paid to the political consequences of scandals (as the dysfunctional and functional theories above), a proper theoretical explanation of how scandals emerge is still missing. Why, among so many media reports out there, only a few become scandals[2]? Another open question is what determines whether politicians survive a scandal or not. In particular, a theory that takes into account the strategic interaction between clean and tainted politicians can shed light on the causal direction of the events we usually observe. Is it the politicians jumping ship that sends a signal to voters and makes the scandal big? Or is it that voters fundamentally thought the scandal was bad and politicians respond to that?

To develop a theory, we need to start from describing recurrent patterns that we observe when scandals take place. Usually, the first news that comes out is a *substantive* scandal, which represents a breach of public trust and norms, a profound transgression of political norms.

Culture is therefore the first potential explanatory variable for scandals' outbreak: the bigger the breach of public norms according to the political system where the scandal occurs, the bigger the scandal. But there is more than just a monotone relation between size of breach of public trust and size of the scandal, which is what any lay intuition suggests. What we can deduce from culture as explanatory variable is that, for example, certain scandals might happen in some countries, with common political values, and not others. But a cultural approach to scandals would end up being useless, if the inference we could make from it is that financial scandals happen in the US because of its capitalistic system, or conspiratorial scandals happen in Italy because of its centuries-long, Machiavellian political tradition.

A fundamental factor that explains the occurrence of scandals is the presence of a *competitive political system.* Even if there is a truly profound breach of public trust, scandals do not occur automatically, even in the presence of a free press. This is a necessary condition, but not sufficient. The media need inside information, which most naturally is going to be provided by opposition parties, or by party colleagues, if they have the incentive to do so (for advancement in the party's hierarchy, for instance). Therefore, a preliminary theoretical implication is that political scandals occur in liberal democracies, in the presence of party competition and with a free press. The question that naturally follows concerns the consequences of scandals. Why do certain scandals remain unnoticed in certain countries and have devastating

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[2]As a recent example, consider the incredible number of negative reports about Trump, and among all of them, the tape scandal became the most viral.

consequences in others? While politicians' incentives to report insider information to the media are an important determinant of the outbreak of a scandal, these incentives vary with different political institutions. Consider different electoral systems: while in party lists systems all party members are replaced or kept with elections, in individual members' districts such as the UK or US you can have individual party members replaced. The incentive of politicians to report inside information to the press when there is a breach in public trust varies with political institutions. This generates interesting testable implications in a comparative setting, about the effect of party list systems - or political institutions in general - on politicians reporting on corruption of co-partisans.

5   Conclusion

Evidence of scandals is scant and mostly confined to the US. From a methodological standpoint, there is a lack of experimental evidence of the effect of scandals on voters' behavior. As far as theory is concerned, there is no proper theoretical characterization of political scandals, how they originate and what is the aftermath. For the reasons highlighted in this literature review, the topic of political scandals offers an incredible opportunity of research in multiple areas of political science. For formal political economy, it is an opportunity to characterize under what conditions scandals occur and develop theory grounded predictions of the scandal aftermath. For comparative politics, it is an opportunity to understand better democratic countries' political systems. The occurrence and aftermath of scandals in certain countries can be explained by its political institutions, and a general analysis of scandals would benefit from incorporating multiple regimes and political institutions. For all these reasons, the study of political scandal represents an incredible research opportunity for future research in political science.

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