



Scandal and American Politics in the 21st Century

Robert Busby

palgrave
macmillan

Scandal and American Politics in the 21st Century

Robert Busby

Scandal and American
Politics in the 21st
Century

palgrave
macmillan

Robert Busby
Department of History and Politics
Liverpool Hope University
Liverpool, UK

ISBN 978-3-030-91637-4 ISBN 978-3-030-91638-1 (eBook)
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-91638-1>

© The Editor(s) (if applicable) and The Author(s), under exclusive license to Springer
Nature Switzerland AG 2022

This work is subject to copyright. All rights are solely and exclusively licensed by the
Publisher, whether the whole or part of the material is concerned, specifically the rights
of translation, reprinting, reuse of illustrations, recitation, broadcasting, reproduction on
microfilms or in any other physical way, and transmission or information storage and
retrieval, electronic adaptation, computer software, or by similar or dissimilar methodology
now known or hereafter developed.

The use of general descriptive names, registered names, trademarks, service marks, etc.
in this publication does not imply, even in the absence of a specific statement, that such
names are exempt from the relevant protective laws and regulations and therefore free for
general use.

The publisher, the authors and the editors are safe to assume that the advice and informa-
tion in this book are believed to be true and accurate at the date of publication. Neither
the publisher nor the authors or the editors give a warranty, expressed or implied, with
respect to the material contained herein or for any errors or omissions that may have been
made. The publisher remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps
and institutional affiliations.

Cover illustration: © Alex Linch shutterstock.com

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature
Switzerland AG

The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

Dedicated to my daughter Anna

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

With thanks to everyone who has assisted and supported me through the creation of this work. This book would not have been possible without the support and patience of my wife Louise, and my daughters Mia and Anna. Through the challenges of a pandemic lockdown, travel bans and closed libraries the path to publication has been very different to the norm, but I could not have created this work without the unerring support of my parents and my family.

Many thanks to my colleagues at Liverpool Hope, and to those who now work in pastures new, but continued to offer support and assistance. In particular, thank you to Michael Holmes, Catalina Montoya Londoño and Danny Rye, and my esteemed colleagues in the History, Politics and International Relations team for being supportive through challenging and unconventional times.

This work would not have been possible without the patience and consideration of Ambra Finotello and Punitha Balasubramaniam. Many thanks for taking the time to create a solid and reassuring path to publication.

CONTENTS

1	Introduction	1
2	Scandal: The Causes, the Problems and the Outcomes	15
3	Twentieth Century Issues: The Lessons of the Past	45
4	Spitzer: The Downfall of a Governor	75
5	John Edwards: The Chaos of the Cover-Up	107
6	Mark Sanford: Hiking in Appalachia	139
7	Anthony Weiner: The Perils of Social Media	173
8	Donald Trump: The Teflon Don	201
9	Conclusion	225
	Index	237

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Robert Busby is a Senior Lecturer in Politics at Liverpool Hope University, Liverpool, United Kingdom. His past publications include monographs on *Reagan and the Iran-Contra Affair* and *Clinton and the Lewinsky Scandal*. He has also published in the fields of political marketing and communication.



Introduction

The presence of scandal in politics is a familiar aspect of the contemporary environment and a common feature of media coverage. Having been a prominent feature of twentieth century politics the unraveling of scandalous episodes and investigations into private lives of political figures continues into the twenty-first century with little sign that the lessons of past episodes have been learned. This in many ways is a dilemma. Those involved in scandal, or even faced with allegations of scandalous wrongdoing, commonly face a profoundly negative experience, experiencing personal and political damage that affects not only the individual involved in the event, but also family members, staff aides and the wider political establishment. Scandal has become an established part of the political environment. It can also be regarded as the consequence of human failings, highlighted in this particular realm because of intense media scrutiny. Any expectation that scandal politics will fade from the political narrative may therefore be misplaced and it could, and should, be considered an issue which is a consistent feature of the political landscape. As a consequence, the focus on scandal as a political genre shows no sign of diminishing in its frequency, its spectacle, or in shaping partisan political accusations of errant behavior or wrongdoing.

The candidacy and election of President Trump in 2016 might have offered a contrast to the predictable scandal fare. The election of a business tycoon to office may have suggested that a contrast could have

been drawn between those in the frequently errant political elite, and those from elite business circles. Alas, from the outset of Trump's candidacy allegations of wrongdoing surrounded him, culminating with covert recordings of Trump emerging in the latter stages of the campaign. This was later compounded with allegations of infidelity, of collusion with Russia and a host of minor indiscretions which created an atmosphere where speculation and allegations of wrongdoing were more frequent than not. Trump responded, in a now familiar combative manner, with allegations of wrongdoing and scandal by Democrats, his predecessors, and members of his own staff who had left their office or had been sacked. This reached a highpoint in 2020 with numerous allegations by Trump that there existed an array of conspiratorial forces working against him (Timm 2020). From the earliest days of the Republic to the twenty-first century, scandal has acted as a negative lure for attention in the public sphere, not losing its luster for capturing popular attention on some of the most corrosive aspects of politics.

Discussion of scandal as a meaningful force within politics has become ever more popular in academia. Far from being a trivial and distracting side issue, its impact on the political realm, its ability to usher in a rapid change of officeholder and its ability to capture public attention gives it an important location in the study of the causes and consequences of its impact on politics. Significant concentration has been given to the role of the media in disseminating scandal issues (Entman 2012; Thompson 2000). There is also a focus across a range of different scandal genres, from those involving the highly visible presidential office (Barberio 2021), to those which address the plethora of sex scandals in modern American politics (Dagnes 2011). This work seeks to add further to the literature on scandal. It has two primary objectives. The first is to examine the evolution of scandal as a political feature in the twenty-first century. The evolution of the internet, social media and the expansion of means through which to learn about and contribute to scandal politics presents a very different environment to that even of the 1990s. The Weiner scandal, discussed in Chapter 7 of this book, involved a sex scandal in which there was no sex and the key players in the scandal did not meet face to face. The indelible electronic footprints left on social media in the twenty-first century have changed the he-said she-said dynamic of human interaction to one where electronic imprints are wheeled out as proof of personal indiscretion. A second aim of this work is to consider the impact of damage control strategies on the standing and legacy of

those involved in scandal and to look at strategies of image restoration, an important dynamic in cultivating improved public standing in politics (Benoit 2015). While allegations of scandal politics might at one point in time have led to a significant decline in standing, potential loss of office and the end of the political career, the efforts in the twenty-first century by individuals embroiled in scandal to resurrect their fortunes and run again for political office suggests that the impact of scandal may not now be what it once was. Rather than being a decisive issue which cast an individual into the political wilderness it could now be interpreted as more of a rite of passage which only serves to blemish a political career rather than terminate it. This is not always the case, but the cases of Weiner and Spitzer serve to show that within a short period of time scandal politics can be accommodated back into a political resume and used as a means of redemption when trying, unsuccessfully in both of those cases, to seek further political office. Mark Sanford however, discussed in Chapter 6, proved to be more successful in the aftermath of wrongdoing. Trump also, when caught out with the Access Hollywood tapes, faced charges that the level of outrage that they might cause could lead to the termination of his campaign. Ultimately, they made little if any difference to his political standing among his supporters and the damage limitation strategy invoked by his campaign strategist Steve Bannon diverted attention onto prior scandal allegations made against President Clinton.

Damage limitation is an important part of the scandal dynamic. There are a range of decisions to be made about how to address charges of wrongdoing. In the examples and case studies used in this work there are a range of strategies utilized including resignation, the use of a cover-up, trying to ride out the scandal, and the simple rebuttal of the allegations. Given the frequency of scandal it might be assumed that there exists a raft of familiar measures which can be deployed to mount an effective public relations effort to offset the charges of wrongdoing. However, scandal is unpredictable. Given the reticence of those who are charged with wrongdoing to openly confess their actions scandal politics and damage limitation frequently operate against a backdrop of incomplete information, cover-ups designed to mask action and a discrepancy of the information available in the public and private realms from multiple participants. The institutional framework of scandal with its revelation, investigation and prosecution aspects are familiar procedural aspects of scandal. But a defense can also be mounted to mitigate against each of these procedures, to minimize their impact, to offer a rebuttal against

the charges and change how each element is viewed in the public realm. That more political figures appear able to accommodate scandal into their political careers may serve to suggest that damage control strategies are now more effective in offsetting charges of wrongdoing and in presenting to the public an alternate interpretation of moral wrongdoing.

Damage limitation works against a backdrop of several variables. The standing of the officeholder involved is an important aspect. Past pronouncement and actions may serve to stress a sense of hypocrisy when wrongdoing is uncovered. As discussed in Chapter 4, Eliot Spitzer had previously acted against prostitution in the state of New York, only later to be held to account for using an escort service. John Edwards had championed the cause of women's rights, only then to be caught fathering a love child and trying to conceal his personal activities while his wife endured a battle with cancer. Consistency and predictability are core aspects of creating and sustaining public trust, and the sudden exposure of action which appears to distort or destroy a previously established image can lead to doubt about the authenticity of the political figure. The evolution of scandal in the twenty-first century may however serve to demonstrate that this can work in an inverse form too. The election of Trump to the presidential office, given his tumultuous private life and understanding of his previous marriages, changed the scenario. When tales of indiscretion arose when Trump was President there was little public outrage, little in the way of a questioning of his moral standing or of the position of his marriage. While it can be asserted that the revelations concerning his private life regarded personal action which took place sometime before he seriously considered running for political office, the detailed revelations of his private actions emerged when he was in office, and were highlighted in a prominent fashion as his lawyer, Cohen, was involved in congressional hearings where transactions regarding non-disclosure agreements were discussed. That there was no pronounced movement in the opinion polls because of the revelations might be put down to public indifference with this type of revelation in the contemporary era. However, it may also be attributed to the fact that Trump carried forward a reputation as a womanizer and the consistency of information in this regard contributed toward an understanding of him as a political figure whose action, rather than countering prior understanding, simply reinforced it. The scandalous reputation therefore may be considered contingent on the reputation of the individual and public understanding of prior consistency of action, whether in a virtuous or deviant way.

The notion of scandal frequently posits the dynamic of the event at the foot of one person, and that their individual actions are the driving force behind its cause and outcome. In power scandals while the accountability may rest with the highest occupant of the political establishment frequently the actions of juniors or subordinates are the driving force behind scandal and those who shape the unfolding events. In Watergate and Iran-Contra the limited control over the unfolding scandals by Nixon and Reagan respectively suggested that while the accountability might rest in the Oval Office the driving force behind the evolution of events lay with those with significantly less political influence. Whether it be Gordon Liddy in Watergate, or Oliver North in Iran-Contra, the evolution of scandal appeared to rest as much with their actions as with that of Nixon or Reagan. In terms of damage limitation the actual power that can be influenced from the highest political office looked very limited and while public relations exercises were enacted they looked to be problematic from the start. Nonetheless there are lessons to be drawn from these power plays. The efforts of the Reagan White House to distance the President from the scandal accusations using plausible deniability, that it was feasible that Reagan was left out of the chain of authority and communication regarding the diversion of funds from the Middle East to Central America, suggests that there are viable strategies that can be utilized to minimize damage, and that lessons can be learned which accept wrongdoing but prevent the matter from becoming catastrophic. Following the revelations Reagan mounted ‘Operation Comeback’, a public relations exercise designed to reassert notions of presidential authority (U.S. News and World Report 1987, 18). The lack of control via established power structures is starkly evident, and the fallout and exacerbation of scandal politics from third party involvement is a pronounced aspect of the contemporary scandal playlist. Watergate and Iran-Contra firmly placed scandal at the forefront of politics, and soon added attention was given not only to the potential abuse of power, but to the issue of individual personal wrongdoing in moral terms.

In keeping with power scandals, episodes where there is a violation of personal morality also retain the opportunity for an individual to lose control of the unfolding of events and to find themselves very much at the mercy of the actions of others. The spouse of the individual involved in infidelity or moral wrongdoing is a particularly important figure. Whether they stand by their partner, accompany them to public events and to press conferences, or distance themselves on account of their own careers

and standing, is now an important part of the interpretation of the likely evolution of scandal politics. Not only is there a moral dilemma involved here but there is also the incentive to seek personal redress for the negative public image that is projected as scandal unfolds. The incentive for personal profit via magazine and television appearances for those involved in scandal can offset the efforts by the perpetrator to try to advance a dominant descriptive narrative of the events, and lead to competing interpretation of how scandalous events unfolded, who was at fault, and influence whether the establishment and public retain trust in the perpetrator of the events. In many of the episodes discussed in this work, the appearance of unity among the staff of the political figure under scrutiny quickly crumbled when the detail of scandal activity unfolded. In this regard the understanding of damage control becomes much more a case of damage limitation, with the opportunity to control the words or actions of others involved in the episode significantly limited.

This book looks at a range of prominent scandal episodes in the twenty-first century and looks at the efforts by those involved in scandal to defend their position, control unfolding events and, in some cases, resurrect a political career. It commences by looking at some of the key theoretical understandings of what a political scandal is, how it is manifested and disseminated and what its impact is on the broader political environment. Rather than being self-contained issues which are frivolous and marginal to mainstream politics, scandal has a detrimental impact on the impressions of the integrity of political figures and on the credibility of the political establishment. The mere use of it as a term of reference for a political event pushes it to the fore as a political weapon which can be used to inflict partisan political damage on opponents, even if there is little in the way of hard evidence to prove a case. The theoretical understanding of scandal and the volume of literature on the topic has increased significantly. In the latter twentieth century focus was generally on individual cases of power abuse and they were dealt with as products of errant individuals who had abused their authority. The creation of the revelation, investigation and prosecution cycle, with Independent Counsels ready to investigate potential wrongdoing, and with investigative journalists ready to tail political figures to address allegations in their private life has pushed scandal to the fore as a regular political event. However, the prevalence of scandal may now have caused something of a numbing regarding messages about political malfeasance and wrongdoing. This

takes the existing understanding of scandal as having a pronounced negative impact into a new realm, that significant elements of the American public have grown tired of the revelations, believe more often than not that political figures will engage in private moral wrongdoing, and that there is a decline in the outrage and shock that revelations can create. This can be incorporated into the broader efforts to enact damage limitation, by dismissing allegations as yet another media investigation into a subject where public interest has waned, and the political impact that scandal revelations may have had diminished.

Initial consideration is given to the scandal politics of the late twentieth century. While the dynamics in the way scandal is investigated, reported and uncovered have changed significantly with the evolution of the internet age, there are lessons to be learned and contrasts drawn from previous prominent scandal events. Consideration here is given initially to both power abuse scandals and then those involving violations of personal morality. The legacy of significant scandals like Watergate of 1972–1974 and Iran-Contra of 1986–1987 served to shape understanding of the hidden dynamic of politics, where major events and undertakings could be hidden from public view. The enormity of events was only open for public scrutiny when political figures were held to account or threatened with legal action. There is also an opportunity here to view how political figures dealt with the allegations of wrongdoing. Scandal in the late twentieth century had significance. Watergate led to charges of impeachment and Nixon's resignation, Iran-Contra witnessed the largest ever one monthly fall in presidential job approval poll statistics. They also created several precedents. It is arguable and plausible that precedent had already been set and that a detailed study of the history of the Republic gives a number of episodes which can be used as foundations for the study of modern scandal. However, with the evolutions of the communications age, live television coverage of press conferences, televised hearings and the detailed and forensic focus on both institutions and individuals scandal changed into an increasingly public rather than largely private spectacle. The legacy of the media coverage of Watergate and of the scandal itself, including the repeated use of the affix 'gate' for virtually any interpretation of political wrongdoing, is testament to the importance of that event. The late twentieth century was important not only for the power scandals, but for matters of personal morality. With a change of orientation for investigative journalism and the private lives of political figures under

increasing scrutiny, interpretations of wrongful moral activity by prominent political figures appeared to have pronounced consequences. Gary Hart withdrew from a run for the presidency having been caught in an extra-marital affair in 1988. The dalliances of Bill Clinton, when both a Governor and President, are well known, and pushed scandal to the fore as a focus of political interest. They suggested that political figures were to be held to account publicly not only for the power that they held and how it was used, but also for their private conduct. Damage limitation strategies had to be crafted not only to address perceptions of the misuse of power, but also now to address private moral lapses and matters which were tangential to the bureaucratic operating of the political office.

The chapters which reflect on scandals of the twenty-first century look at the causes of the scandal, the efforts by the perpetrator to address the initial fallout, and the damage limitation strategies that were employed to mitigate damage to reputation and political office. Given that there are numerous events that can be grouped together into the genre of scandal a selective choice has been made as to which episodes to address. In order to try to get as full a picture as possible of the impact of scandal, consideration has been given to some of the more prominent scandals, and attention has also been given to a range of different offices. As much as it is frequently desirable to concentrate on the presidential office the breadth of media coverage and online discussion now presents opportunities to examine scandals with detail at state level. Interest in this has been additionally highlighted with documentaries such as *Client 9*, looking at the Spitzer scandal and *Weiner*, a fly-on-the-wall examination of Anthony Weiner's effort to resurrect his political career. This type of material not only provides additional information about scandal politics, but again raises scandal as a subject area as a significant aspect of politics, which has the lure and public interest to feature on the most prominent of media platforms and receive popular acclaim.

The first case study under consideration is that of Eliot Spitzer, Governor of New York and a person of sound political reputation and credibility, who resigned from office following investigation into electronic transactions regarding an escort agency in New York. The unraveling of his political reputation had significant repercussions. His position in trying to regulate aspects of financial activity on Wall Street had led to him having a draconian reputation, and his political confidence had seemingly masked a completely different personality in the private realm. As with the other examples in this work the position of his

spouse was deemed important to the evolution of this scandal. Acting as a barometer of the position of their marriage Spitzer's wife was pivotal in making the damage limitation strategies work, particularly with respect to the political comeback that Spitzer would seek to make at a later time. The Spitzer case is particularly instructive in scandal politics as he took considerable time to discuss the causes, consequences and personal considerations on the matter following his fall from grace. Rather than being the conventional political confession, his lengthy interviews and reflections on what scandal allegations meant for contemporary politics gave an insight into revised meanings and understandings of scandal at this time. That Spitzer decided to run again for political office is testament to a new notion that even a short time after a pronounced and highly visible scandal episode there may now be opportunities for individuals see this type of episode as a temporary inconvenience rather than the termination of a political career. However, caution has to be exercised here as Spitzer was unsuccessful in his endeavor to hold public office once again and the impact of the legacy of scandal is taken into consideration in an examination of his new bid for office.

Focus thereafter turns to the politics of North Carolina and John Edwards. His prominence as a Democrat Senator of note, a vice-presidential candidate with John Kerry in 2004, and as a prospective presidential candidate for 2008 put Edwards to the fore as a figure of public note and reputation. While initial rumors about Edwards' private activity circulated online, there appeared little enthusiasm to follow up on the speculation and although claims are made in this work, as in others, that scandal is one of the prime lures for media and public interest, this did not seem to initially apply in conventional terms at the outset of this episode. The Edwards scandal is one where the many offshoots from the initial action and wrongdoing proved well-nigh impossible to control and the eventual unraveling of the detail of the events proved particularly injurious to Edwards' standing. He was portrayed as unfaithful to his wife, hypocritical regarding his past positions on women's rights, having ill-served his political aides and of being evasive and creating mistruths which would be exposed when those around him decided to give their own individual interpretations of events. While damage limitation strategies are often enacted with haste and urgency, that Edwards had time to consider his next move, across several months, demonstrates that even

the most astute political figure in conventional times can have their judgment clouded and their decision making compromised when caught in a number of ever increasing moral and strategic dilemmas.

Anthony Weiner's experiences with scandal are well known on account of the documentary *Weiner*. Ordinarily the personal problems encountered by a Congressman from New York might only make some minor political ripples, but in this instance the genre of scandal politics was changed significantly with Weiner's impact on the understanding of the relationship between social media and scandal politics, in conjunction with his impact on the 2016 presidential election. This scandal was not the first time that the influence of electronic communication had played a prominent role in scandal politics, as is discussed in a number of the chapters of this work. However, Weiner was embroiled in a unique sex scandal, where he never met the person he was communicating with, did not have a sexual relationship and had tried, unsuccessfully to his cost, to mask his identity. Weiner's partner, Huma Abedin, played a significant and influential role in shaping media and public perceptions of this scandal, and her role as an aide to presidential candidate Hillary Clinton served to give this scandal a wider political impact. As with Spitzer, Weiner tried to mount a political comeback and minimize the impact of the legacy of scandal on his political reputation. However, his repeated actions, in keeping with those which caused him problems in the first instance, meant that scandal haunted his political career during the attempted comeback and ultimately with further errant action on his part, ended up with failure. What started as a promptly deleted Twitter message ended up terminating a promising political career, created a legacy tarnished by scandal and a spell in prison. In many respects Weiner's damage limitation efforts are a prime case study in how not to manage scandal politics.

Mark Sanford created concern when he went missing from his office when serving as Governor of South Carolina. It transpired that he had left the country when conducting an extra-marital affair. Sanford's case proved to be an unusual one. He was widely condemned, by both Republicans and Democrats for his actions, his marriage broke down and he was subject to attempts to impeach him. However, he soldiered on in office, saw out his term and seemed to go against all conventional wisdom given the predicament he found himself in. Remarkably, he then, even given the controversy surrounding his personal conduct, went on to be elected to the federal Congress and in 2019 announced his intention to seek the Republican nomination for the presidential office. That effort was

unsuccessful. Nonetheless Sanford showed that revelations surrounding an extra-marital affair, and a seeming disregard of the responsibilities of office, could be accommodated in the evolution of his political career. His damage limitation efforts were haphazard and frequently erratic, but they worked. Chapter 6 considers why Sanford was able to mount a rear-guard defense of his position and offset widespread criticism of his personal and political conduct.

The final chapter of this work considers the candidacy and presidency of Donald Trump. By the time of his election to office, and certainly through his term in office the use of the word scandal as a descriptor for his personal action, prior activities and political agenda became almost a daily fare. This chapter, rather than trying to cover every claim of scandal, focusses in on two specific charges of moral wrongdoing on the part of Trump. In the first instance consideration is given to the Access Hollywood episode which occurred during the presidential campaign of 2016. The disclosure of explicit private recordings, released in the pivotal closing weeks of the campaign, appeared to have fatally damaged Trump's chances of electoral success (Loofbourow 2020). Media commentary signified that they entailed the final nail in Trump's electoral coffin and that a Clinton landslide would follow. Yet, through strategic and prompt management of the situation the event was in part turned to Trump's advantage, by casting his words as merely that, words. This contrasted with the more stringent allegations made against former President Bill Clinton at this time. The orchestration of this rear-guard action changed the narrative at the time and while Trump's comments created a media firestorm there appeared little to show that public opinion had changed in any significant way, suggesting that the damage limitation strategy here worked.

The second case study involving challenges to Trump's credibility occurred when he was President. Rumors surfaced of infidelity at a time prior to his decision to engage in politics. Allegations made by Stormy Daniels about a formerly discreet liaison, which had been covered by a non-disclosure agreement, created significant media interest, brought Trump's personal lawyer Michael Cohen to the fore, and ultimately led to congressional hearings where images of payment cheques served to prove that significant sums of money had been paid to buy the silence of Daniels and another participant in the scandal allegations, Karen McDougal. Again however, the revelations made little impact on public opinion. Far from being the bombshell information that had dogged presidents like

Bill Clinton, there appeared to be a flippancy regarding the Daniels allegations. The evidence of payment was clear to see, the allegations were both salacious and detailed, and there was sufficient coverage of the issue in the media. However, it appeared as though the American public had little interest in the matter. In part this may be on account of the number of allegations of wrongdoing targeted at Trump, and that this scandal allegation just fitted into a broader narrative. It may also be the case that this type of activity and revelation was part and parcel of what might have been expected of Trump.

The range of cases discussed in this work highlight the commonality of the problems created and addressed by prominent political figures. There is a clear contrast in how scandal allegations and charges have been managed by different political figures on the defensive and, consequently, how there appears to be no simple single route to political or personal redemption. This makes the lure of invoking allegations of scandalous behavior, whether substantial or not, a tempting weapon to utilize in seeking to destabilize the position of opponents. It is easy to argue that those embroiled in scandal are deserving of the investigations and prosecution that follows, however the fact that the fallout from scandal is much wider, entwines individuals who had no part in the creation of the initial furore, and overall casts a negative shadow on politics gives scandal a wider meaning than that of a morality play focussed on an individual. Its continuation suggests that individuals fail to heed the lessons of the past, and make assumptions that they will not be caught, or that the scandal fallout can be managed in a private capacity. As evidenced in this work, the abrasive experience of scandal in the twentieth century has continued into the twenty-first century. Indeed the challenges of addressing scandal allegations have become more challenging as the electronic footprint left via private communications and transactions has often provided hard indelible evidence of wrongdoing.

REFERENCES

- Barberio, Richard P. 2021. *Presidents and Political Scandal: Managing Scandal in the Modern Era*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Benoit, William L. 2015. *Accounts, Excuses and Apologies: Image Repair Theory and Research*, 2nd ed. Albany: State University of New York.

- Dagnes, Alison. 2011. *Sex Scandals in American Politics: A Multidisciplinary Approach to the Construction and Aftermath of Contemporary Political Sex Scandals*. Edited by Alison Dagnes. London: Continuum.
- Entman, Robert M. 2012. *Scandal and Silence: Media Responses to Presidential Conduct*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Loofbourow, Lili. 2020. "The Moment That Should Have Changed Everything." *Slate*, October 7. Accessed April 12, 2021. <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2020/10/trump-access-hollywood-tape-revisited.html>.
- Thompson, John B. 2000. *Political Scandal: Power and Visibility in the Media Age*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Timm, Jane C. 2020. "Trump Versus the Truth: The Most Outrageous Falsehoods of his Presidency." *NBC News*, December 31. Accessed July 12, 2021. <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/donald-trump/trump-versus-truth-most-outrageous-falsehoods-his-presidency-n1252580>.
- U.S. News and World Report. 1987. "Can 'Operation Comeback' Work?" *U.S. News and World Report*, January 26: 18–20.



Scandal: The Causes, the Problems and the Outcomes

The prevalence of scandal in American politics, at all levels of government, provides ample opportunity for an exploration of the causes and consequences of moral wrongdoing in contemporary politics. The visibility of scandal episodes allows for an appreciation of public opinion not only on individual scandals, but as an aggregate accumulation of doubt in political figures and the legitimacy of the political system over time. While one might have considered that the legacy of scandal politics would mean that lessons could have been learned from the actions of those previously involved in scandal, there appears no sign that the torrent of scandal or allegations of moral wrongdoing have led to changes of behavior, or of a greater ability to contain the fallout through improved public relations actions. Across the span of presidential history and at state and local level there have been scandals involving corruption, moral wrongdoing, the abuse of power and financial irregularity. Scandal politics operates around a central concept of a moral violation of an aggregate public understanding of contemporaneous moral acceptability. Its prevalence in the twenty-first century, even given the enduring legacy of Watergate and the impeachment of President Clinton, is testament to its ability to endure irrespective of the impact it has had on people and political institutions. In the era of Trump, allegations of wrongdoing and the misuse of power continued unabated. However, there appears to be a subtle societal change which suggests that wrongdoing might not be the

political ball and chain it once was assumed to be. Indeed, the changing nature of scandal in the Trump era may be quite pronounced as the outcomes of the 2018 mid-term elections may suggest. ‘Representatives Duncan Hunter and Chris Collins campaigned this fall while out on bail for felony charges. Representative Greg Gianforte had been convicted of misdemeanour assault. Senator Bob Menendez’s trial on bribery and fraud charges resulted in a hung jury. How did voters respond? All four were re-elected last month. Mr Menendez by 10 percentage points’ (Lerer 2018).

An examination of American political scandal throws up a number of challenges when trying to identify whether strategies of containment can be employed so as to minimize the personal and political damage that they seem to create. Across time expectations of political figures change, moral values within society are prone to evolve, and a range of factors such as the perceived nature of the personality of the individual caught up in the matter is presented in critical detail by the media. What scandals do have in common is an ability to draw attention to the plight of the individual and focus public attention on the failings of those who are both politically accountable and already in the public eye. This makes damage limitation strategies difficult as it is well-nigh impossible to address the scandal episode without a contextual backdrop of popular expectations of the political figure already having been molded in the public domain. What does appear to be a new evolution of scandal is that it now appears not to mark the end of a political career or be viewed as an insurmountable problem. Rather, as many of the case studies in this work suggest, a re-accommodation into the political theater is possible and scandal politics may now merely mark a temporary failing in a political career, rather than the cause of its termination. This is of course not always the case, as the failings that led to the scandal episode in the first instance may be inherent in the individual involved, Anthony Weiner being the prime example, but nonetheless there does appear to be a change to the impact of scandal politics and an understanding of it in the twenty-first century. Moreover, it has become more of a bi-partisan weapon to deploy. The concepts of a strong Republican moral standpoint, prominent particularly during the 1990s as a reaction to Bill Clinton, has made way from a more widespread utilization of scandal politics as a political weapon. Apostolidis and Williams (2017, 793–794), analyzing sex scandals and their management argue, ‘While Republicans cast themselves as the keepers of moral virtue during the Clinton years, sex scandals have become a decidedly

more bi-partisan affair in the ensuing years. Since that time there has been an unrelenting stream of revelations comprising the reputations of an ever-growing list of elected officials.’ As a means of political attack, often irrespective of whether an individual will lose their office, allegations of scandal retain an appeal, with a knowledge that suggestions of impropriety will receive media attention.

CONCEPTS OF POLITICAL SCANDAL

Discussion of political scandal covers a wide remit and media, political and academic consideration has been given to a whole range of transgressions which might be collected together under the term of behavior or action which violates a moral standpoint and is assumed to be scandalous. Actions of criminality, corruption, infidelity and lewd behavior or commentary have been brought together to give the understanding of political scandal an elasticity of meaning and usage. In part this has been to the convenience of those who wish to use the concept of scandal to cause injury to political opponents, and in part this use of the term in an elastic format has an air of convenience for the media. It can be used to convey, through simplistic usage, an expansive understanding of wrongdoing. It is simple, immediate and accusatory. In the instances addressed in this work the core realm of investigation involves cases of allegations of moral wrongdoing in the realm of infidelity and sex in politics, although the importance of power violations is clear from the fallout and legacies of both Watergate and the Iran-Contra scandal.

There are different types of political scandal and they appear to have different public impacts. Thompson (2000, 9) identifies three main genres as those involving sexual activity, financial impropriety and those involving an abuse of power. In a research paper for the American Political Science Association Doherty et al. (2011) tested hypothetical scenarios of supposed wrongdoing by an imagined political figure and then asked a sample about their understandings of the severity of the wrongdoing. The poll sample was presented with four case scenarios of wrongdoing; tax evasion combined with power abuse, tax evasion but with no abuse of power, infidelity which included an abuse of power and infidelity but with no abuse of power. The sample was asked about whether they would vote for a person in these circumstances in an election, and how they felt the individual was doing their job. They were also asked about what they thought of the hypothetical person as an individual character. The

respondents to the scenario considered the abuse of power to be the most harmful action. The sample also found that infidelity without abuse of power was the least harmful or problematic action of those suggested. This outcome makes for an interesting and important contribution to contemporary understandings of scandal politics. Yet even if sex scandals are considered lesser ills to those involving transgression of power there still exists a pronounced capacity to have a detrimental impact, ‘Scandals however, have other important effects, namely, political and moral sanctions. Scandals put in motion the politics of shaming, actions that publicly damage individual reputations and serve as social reminders that regardless of their legal resolution, certain acts still constitute moral transgressions’ (Tumber and Waisbord 2004, 1145). Sex scandals are frequently those which receive most media and public attention, largely on the grounds that financial dealings can be complex and laborious to understand and sex scandals are relatively easy to relate to and comprehend. For example, the Whitewater scandal involving Bill and Hillary Clinton received relatively little public interest when contrasted with the sex scandals that Bill Clinton was accused of when a Governor and President (Rosenstiel 1994). The ability to relate to the predicament faced by those involved in sex scandals may serve to indicate an ability to show dissatisfaction but also, importantly, understanding and forgiveness. As discussed later in this chapter there is also, dovetailing into this, changing expectations of the moral position of figures who hold positions of power, and a differentiation of expectation that they may act in a different way to that of the general population.

There are a range of definitions in the wider sense of the word scandal and how it can be applied to society and a range of cultural, social and sporting episodes. Addressing the plethora of scandals in New York across a number of years, Colin Harrison (2012) in *New York Magazine* pinpointed the origins and applicability of the word. He argued ‘But what is a scandal? The etymology is suggestive: The French *scandale*, from Old French. Means “cause of sin”; the Latin *scandalum* means “trap, stumbling block, temptation.” Perhaps a basic definition is in order: A scandal involves unseemly conduct that results in the destruction of a reputation. Someone’s position in society changes for the worse. The fall must appear irreversible. Suffering is necessary. As is humiliation.’ In addressing the meaning of political scandal Thompson (2000, 13–14) has identified five core elements which can be utilized to address an episode of scandalous behavior or accusation. They are; the transgression of a moral position,