
SCANDAL AND POLITICAL CANDIDATE IMAGE

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Using a 3X2 experimental design, this research examines political candidate image as a function of candidate gender and involvement in a sex or financial scandal. One hundred fifty students from college classes in continuing education were given candidate descriptions that varied only by gender of candidate and involvement in a sex scandal, financial scandal, or no scandal. Respondents gave candidates involved in scandal lower character scores. Both male and female candidates received lower character scores in the presence of a financial scandal than in the presence of a sex scandal, but counter to expectations, female candidates received significantly higher character scores in the presence of a sex scandal.

Given the prevalence of political scandals in contemporary American politics, and the differing impacts scandals have on particular politicians, it is relevant to investigate why scandals affect some politicians more negatively than others. President Bill Clinton, most notably, was twice elected president and maintained high approval ratings despite scandal-fueled doubts about his character (Renshon 1996). On the other hand, Gary Hart's presidential candidacy could not withstand the effects of a sexual scandal. There are many factors, of course, that affect perceptions of political candidates such as Clinton and Hart. Prior conceptions about the person, party affiliation, agreement or disagreement with the policy issues of a candidate, or sex of a candidate may cause people to evaluate politicians differently, including those involved in scandal. This research attempts to control extraneous

variables by the use of an experimental research design to determine if sex of candidate and type of scandal, financial or sex, affect how the public evaluates a candidate involved in a scandal.

Regarding gender of candidate, research indicates that trait inferences based on sex may affect voters' perceptions of political candidates' character and personality traits (Sapiro 1981–1982; Huddy and Terkildsen 1993a and 1993b), their likelihood of winning office (Carroll 1985; Fox and Smith 1998), and how the candidate will be evaluated in the event of a scandal (Funk 1996). In a 1996 experiment about scandal and character traits, Funk chose as independent variables the respondents' perceived trait inferences of a candidate and the type of scandal, financial or sex. 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 her descriptions. After respondents had recorded their impressions, she distributed information that detailed the candidate's 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.

This information is significant in a study comparing male and female political candidates if it is considered that female candidates are more likely to be judged as warm than male candidates, especially in instances of low information on policy issues (Sapiro 1981–1982). Gender stereotypes cause female politicians to be considered more honest and trustworthy. Accordingly, "...scandals about female politicians might carry especially strong negative implications because they disconfirm prior expectations of greater integrity" (Funk 1996:18).

There is also a distinct possibility that a sex scandal would be particularly damaging to a female candidate. A. E. Bayer (1975) reveals a strong double standard when it comes to judging the sexual behavior of male and female college students. In a study conducted at the University of Colorado, she determined that although sexual activity was increasing among college age females, it was increasing despite a lack of support for female sexual activity outside of marriage. She writes: "...considerable evidence was found among men and women alike for the existence of a strong double standard...white males felt their friends approved of premarital intercourse, females felt their having had intercourse would be disapproved of by friends, family, and

society alike" (Bayer 1975, 391). More recent studies of the double standard have produced mixed results. Mark and Miller (1986) found that sexual permissiveness affected some ratings of individuals, but no evidence of a double standard. A more recent study reported by Gentry (1998) also found that a double standard did not operate in the formation of overall evaluations of individuals, but she was careful to point out that empirical studies tend to strip the context from judgments that are made. One study (Sheeran et al. 1996) indicated that the operation of the double standard may be mitigated by religiosity.

This present study uses a 3 X 2 experimental design to examine the effects of type of scandal and sex of candidates on the public's perception of candidates. Prior research suggests the following expectations:

1. Candidates with no scandal will be evaluated more favorably than candidates with a scandal. There will not be a significant difference between evaluations of male and female candidates at this level.
2. In the presence of any type of scandal, males will be evaluated more favorably than females.
3. Male candidates involved in a financial scandal will be evaluated less favorably than male candidates involved in a sex scandal and more favorably than females involved in any type of scandal.
4. Female candidates involved in a sex scandal will be evaluated less favorably than female candidates involved in a financial scandal and less favorably than males involved in any type of scandal.

SUBJECTS AND PROCEDURE

In November 1997, 150 students enrolled in continuing education courses at an eastern liberal arts college were presented with packets containing a candidate description, a newspaper clipping, and a questionnaire.¹ The candidate descriptions depicted a fictional United States Senate candidate from Iowa and differed only in the sex of the candidate. The candidate, either Robert Anderson or Kathleen Anderson, was depicted as an active and competent lawyer who had previously served as a state representative (See Appendix).

The second item in the packet, in the form of a newspaper clipping, described the scandal. Respondents in the control group received the "no scandal" article, which described the candidate's daughter joining Anderson at his/her law firm. The second group received the financial scandal article,

in which Anderson admitted that he/she had embezzled money from a client of his/her law firm, while the third group received the sex scandal article, in which Anderson admitted that he/she had been in an affair with a client from his/her law firm (See Appendix). All groups had 25 randomly assigned subjects.

DEPENDENT VARIABLES

The subjects were asked to rate fourteen trait characteristics of the candidates presented in a nine point semantic differential format. The first dependent variable, "character," is a five-item scale developed through factor analysis of the fourteen semantic differential items. The items loading positively on this factor were believable/not believable, honest/dishonest, moral/immoral, trustworthy/not trustworthy, and strong values/weak values; this factor explained 44.1 percent of the variance among the subjects' responses. The character score was computed by summing the responses of the subjects on these five items; the mean score was 25.96, with a standard deviation of 10.71.

Three items relating to competence, effectiveness, and qualification produced a second factor, "Competence," with a mean of 21.2 and a standard deviation of 4.68 that accounted for 10.4 percent of the differences among the subjects' responses. In addition, as a manipulation check to be certain the subjects recognized the sex of the candidate they were evaluating, a masculine/feminine semantic differential item was included. Male candidates were evaluated as significantly more masculine than were female candidates.

RESULTS

Both scandal and gender significantly affected the character score (See Table 1). As expected, respondents gave candidates with no scandal higher character scores than candidates with a scandal ($F=36.2, p < .001$), and there were no significant differences between evaluations of males and female candidates with no scandal ($t = -.567, ns$).

But contrary to expectations, males did not enjoy higher character scores in the presence of a scandal. Females received significantly higher character scores in the presence of a sex scandal ($t = -4.03, p < .01$). Females also

Table 1
Mean Character Scores by Scandal Type and Sex

Candidate Sex	No Scandal	Financial Scandal	Sex Scandal	All Conditions
Male	32.7	19.8	21.2	24.6
Female	33.8	17.6	20.7	27.4
All	33.2	18.7	25.9	26.0

received higher character scores in the presence of both scandals combined, although this result just missed statistical significance ($t = -1.77, p = .08$). Both male and female candidates received lower character scores in the presence of a financial scandal than in the presence of a sex scandal, but there were no significant differences between evaluations of male and female candidates with a financial scandal ($t = .832, ns$).²

Scores on the other dependent variable, "Competence," were not significantly affected by either scandal or gender.³

CONCLUSIONS

This experiment is significant, especially given the recent scandals in American politics, because it demonstrates that the public may evaluate political candidates differently according to the type of scandal in which the candidate was involved and the candidate's sex.

The lower character scores for financial scandals confirm prior research (Funk 1996). This might be because people believe financial integrity is more relevant to a candidate's performance in office than is sexual integrity. 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.

The higher character scores for females in a sex scandal suggest that a female candidate would suffer less in the public's perception than a male candidate would in the presence of a sex scandal. People may perceive

females who run for office as more masculine, so they are not subjected to the traditional puritan double standard that most females are when it comes to sexual matters (Carlson and Boring 1981). A sex scandal might, in fact, add to the perceived masculinity of a female candidate. As Leeper (1991) has shown, females may benefit, particularly in an election campaign, if they are perceived as more masculine. This, of course, does not imply that it would be more advantageous for a female to have a sex scandal than to have no scandal at all.

Females might also suffer less damage in the presence of a scandal because of gender stereotypes. Since people may think females are more trustworthy and honest than males, they might be more likely to discount scandal information about female politicians (Funk 1996).

Further research could clarify the relationships between scandal, sex, and perceived character. Other independent variables such as incumbency, level of political office, news coverage of male and female candidates, and sex-role attitudes of respondents could also affect candidate evaluations (Kahn 1994). Partisanship, whether the candidate admits or does not admit to a scandal (Chanley et al. 1994), or a same-sex relationship scandal could produce significant results as well. Another important question raised by this study is how scandals affect a candidate's electability. As seems to be the case with Clinton, and consistent with our negative finding of the impact of scandal on competence, voters distinguish between competence and character when evaluating candidates. Scandal, therefore, may be less an issue in political campaigns than competence, and opponents' character attacks and mudslinging tactics might be less effective than imagined in damaging one's opponent. Further research, then, might explore in more depth the electability, not just the character, of male and female candidates involved in a scandal.

APPENDIX

The following are the experimental materials presented to our subjects. Each subject received two messages. The first was simply a candidate profile with the name (and gender) of the candidate varied by condition. The second in the format of a newspaper clipping involved the manipulation of presence and type of scandal.

CANDIDATE PROFILE POLITICAL UPDATE

Congressional Candidate Profile: Kathleen Anderson (Robert Anderson)

Kathleen Anderson, 50, an Iowa native, has declared her candidacy for the United States Senate. She is married and the mother of two children. Kathleen attended Yale University Law School and graduated sixteenth in her class. Prior to her candidacy, Kathleen held several positions. She began her law career at the law offices of Forsythe and McNeil in Iowa City. After eleven years of dedicated service she returned to Weston, Iowa, to open her own practice of Anderson, Buddington and Chase. She worked on the Weston Beautification Council and Weston School Committee. Her successful law career gave way to her political concerns, leading her to run successfully for state representative for the Third District. Working in the state legislature, Kathleen was quickly appointed to several important committees, eventually co-chairing the Ways and Means and Education Committees. She has also been very active in farming issues, taking an active stance to support rural residents. She served on the Budgetary Task Force, a bi-partisan commission which passed the most successful Iowa budget plan in ten years.

A sports enthusiast, Kathleen excels in cross-country skiing and tennis and has been a strong supporter of the "Center for Youth" Project in Iowa City. Kathleen is also an accomplished chef; she has organized and cooked for fund-raisers throughout the state. She has been honored with several achievement awards from various community organizations throughout the state for her hard work and dedication to the people of Iowa. Kathleen has worked on several state projects and has long been considered an expert on rural problems. An eloquent and outgoing woman, Kathleen radiates confidence and achievement. Kathleen's warm but firm nature has been instrumental in producing change in the past and would lead one to believe more of her will be seen in the future.

THE NO-SCANDAL CONDITION

ANDERSON JOINS MOTHER (FATHER) AT FIRM

Weston - Recently Jennifer Anderson, the daughter of Senatorial

candidate Kathleen (Robert) Anderson, joined the law firm her mother founded seven years ago with a fellow alumnus from Yale University Law School and a high school friend who attended Harvard University Law School. Although candidate Anderson has taken the year off to campaign for office, Anderson, Buddington, and Chase will not suffer greatly due to her absence.

Jennifer Anderson graduated last May from Harvard University Law School twelfth in her class, four spots higher than that of her mother, and was involved in several political campaigns in Boston. Therefore, in combination with her mother's previous political experiences as the State Representative of the Third District and her position on the Weston School Committee, political campaigning is nothing new to the recent graduate.

When asked her opinion of her mother's bid for U.S. Congress Jennifer responded: My mom has proven herself time and time again in every office she has held, to be a competent and energetic leader whose first concern is that of her constituents.

Kathleen Anderson plans to campaign next week in Iowa City.

THE SEXUAL SCANDAL CONDITION

ANDERSON ADMITS TO AFFAIR

High Plains - An investigation by the Tribune reveals that U.S. Senatorial candidate Kathleen (Robert) Anderson had an affair with a former client.

In an interview yesterday, Anderson's former client confirmed they had an affair. The two were sexually involved for three years beginning in 1987. Anderson represented the man in real estate proceedings while employed at the law firm of Forsythe and McNeil.

Anderson took time out of her campaigning schedule yesterday to hold a press conference in High Plains. During the conference Anderson acknowledged having the affair with her former client. Anderson went on to say, "I regret that unfortunate period in my life. But that was ten years ago. I understand it was a bad decision for which I am truly sorry. I have reconciled with my spouse and have made up for my wrongdoings."

The affair broke off in 1990 when Anderson left Forsythe and McNeil and moved back to her hometown of Weston. Since moving to Weston, Anderson has been a partner of the law firm she co-founded, Anderson, Buddington and Chase. Anderson took a leave of absence from Anderson,

Buddington and Chase last winter to run for U.S. Senate.

THE FINANCIAL SCANDAL CONDITION

ANDERSON ADMITS TO EMBEZZLEMENT

Iowa City - Kathleen (Robert) Anderson, a 50-year old Weston native running for US Senate admitted yesterday that she embezzled money while an attorney at the Forsythe and McNeil law firm.

Anderson, who was employed by Forsythe and McNeil from 1979 to 1990, embezzled the funds from a single client over a period of 3 years beginning in 1987. She resigned from the firm in 1990 and co-founded the Anderson, Buddington, and Chase law firm in Weston. She took a leave of absence last winter to campaign for the Senate.

"I regret the grave misunderstanding that occurred during my tenure at Forsythe and McNeil," Anderson said yesterday on the campaign trail in Ames. She confirmed that she had overcharged a single client and deposited excess money in a high interest bank account.

Anderson graduated from Yale Law School in 1979. She has been a state representative from District III.

NOTES

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1. Since subjects were students in a school of continuing education they are characterized by more demographic diversity than other student populations. Of course they are not representative of the adult population, but most attend college classes part time and are employed full time. The mean age of the subject pool is 26.9, 52 percent are female, 29.7 percent are Democrats, 21.4 percent are Republicans, and 42.8 percent are Independents. Only 10.2 percent indicate that they discuss politics very often, but only 4.1 percent say they never discuss politics. And 19.2 percent say they are very interested in politics, but only 8.2 percent are not at all interested. Subjects received the experimental materials well before the Monica Lewinsky scandal was in the headlines.

2. Also examined were the three-way interactions taking into account the gender of subjects. No significant interactions were found, indicating that subject gender does not affect the relationships between candidate gender, scandal condition and evaluation of candidate character. This is consistent with studies of the double standard (Gentry, 1998; Mark and Miller, 1986).

3. Also examined was the influence of candidate gender and scandal condition on semantic differential items that were not included in character and competence scales. No significant interactions were found, but candidates who were involved in a scandal as opposed to those who were not were seen as significantly less "electable" and "careful."

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