

Scandal Potential

How political context and news congestion affect the president's vulnerability to media scandal

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Abstract

Despite its importance in contemporary American politics, presidential scandal is poorly understood within political science. Scholars typically interpret scandals as resulting from the disclosure of official misbehavior, but the likelihood and intensity of media scandals is also influenced by the political and news context. In this article, I provide a theoretical argument for two independent factors that should increase the president's vulnerability to scandal: low approval among opposition party identifiers and a lack of congestion in the news agenda. Using new data and statistical approaches, I find strong support for both claims. First, I estimate duration models demonstrating that media scandals are more likely when approval is low among opposition identifiers. Using exogenous news events as an instrumental variable to overcome the endogeneity of news congestion, I then show how competing stories can crowd out scandal coverage. These results suggest that contextual factors shape the occurrence of political events and how such events are interpreted.

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From Iran-Contra to Monica Lewinsky, presidential scandal has come to play an especially important role in contemporary American politics since Watergate, but it remains an elusive and poorly understood topic within political science.¹ To date, most quantitative research on scandal has focused on the *effects* of allegations of impropriety on trust in government and the media,² members of Congress,³ or the president.⁴ No clear understanding has emerged about the context in which scandals involving legislators are most likely to occur, however—both Peters and Welch and Welch and Hibbing find no obvious time trend, partisan differences, or effect of length of incumbency on scandals involving members of the House of Representatives⁵—and no one has systematically analyzed why presidential scandals occur.⁶ In particular, even though scandals forced out or seriously threatened the tenures of three of the last eight presidents (Nixon, Reagan, and Clinton), we know little about why scandals happen to presidents at some times and not others.

One problem is the way that scandal has been conceptualized. Scholars have typically defined scandal as the result of the disclosure of some act of wrongdoing or norm violation.⁷ However, whether any specific case meets such a standard is often unclear or contested. Moreover, such a normative standard is less useful in understanding when scandals are *perceived* to occur in public debate, particularly when there is no definitive evidence of misconduct. In such cases, context appears to influence whether a scandal is believed to have occurred. When the political and news environment is unfavorable, scandals may erupt in the press despite thin evidentiary support. By contrast, under more favorable conditions, even well-supported allegations can languish.

I thus develop a new theory that focuses on *media* scandal—the widespread recognition of a controversy as a scandal in mainstream press coverage.⁸ According to my theory, these media scan-

¹Cameron 2002, p. 655.

²See, e.g., Zimmer 1979; Bowler and Karp 2004.

³See, e.g., Peters and Welch 1980; Welch and Hibbing 1997.

⁴See, e.g., Ostrom and Simon 1985; Fackler and Lin 1995; Meinke and Anderson 2001.

⁵Peters and Welch 1980; Welch and Hibbing 1997.

⁶Previous studies have examined the relationship between divided government and Congressional investigations of the executive branch, but such investigations are an endogenous part of the process by which scandals are created rather than the outcome of interest. See Mayhew 2005; Kriner and Schwartz 2008; Parker and Dull 2009; Parker and Dull 2013.

⁷See, e.g., Apostolidis and Williams 2004, pp. 3–4.

⁸My use of the term “media scandal” should be read as referring to mainstream news sources. The partisan media may help to create scandals, but it is mainstream media coverage that both defines which events are recognized as

dals reflect a *widespread elite perception* of official wrongdoing, corruption, or misbehavior that is jointly created by the opposition party and the press in the contemporary era. While the occurrence of scandal will of course be affected by the strength of the available evidence of misconduct, the potential for media scandal in a given time period should also vary considerably depending on the political and news context, which shape the behavior of the press and the opposition party.

In this article, I identify two independent factors that should be especially important in creating the potential for media scandal. First, as opposition party identifiers view the president more negatively, the demand for scandal coverage and allegations should grow, which should induce additional scandal coverage and allegations that will thereby increase the likelihood of scandal. Conversely, when opposition identifiers have more positive attitudes about the president, the incidence of media scandal should decrease. Second, competition from other news stories can reduce the incentive to pursue allegations of wrongdoing or crowd them off of the front page relative to “slow news” periods in which the opportunity costs of pursuing scandal coverage are lower. As a result, media scandals will be more likely to emerge when the news agenda is less congested.

I test these hypotheses using data for the 1977–2008 period from the *Washington Post*, which is the leading outlet for coverage of national political scandal in the mainstream media. I find that low approval of the president among opposition party identifiers significantly increases the likelihood of media scandal onset. I also use the incidence of exogenous disasters and tragedies as an instrumental variable to show that pressure from competing news stories has a substantial negative effect on the likelihood and intensity of scandal coverage. Taken together, these findings demonstrate the role played by political context and news congestion in determining when an administration will experience a media scandal.

scandals and brings them to a wider audience.

A new approach: Defining a media scandal

One explanation for the lack of quantitative research on scandal is that the concept itself not been adequately conceptualized. To date, most scholars have defined it as the public disclosure of an ethical or moral transgression—e.g., “the publicization of a transgression of a social norm.”⁹ Some scholars define political scandal more specifically as a violation of the norms governing elected officeholders—e.g., “activity that seeks to increase political power at the expense of process and procedure.”¹⁰ However, these evidence-based definitions are not only difficult to measure or quantify but fail to accurately classify the outcomes we observe in contemporary politics.¹¹ In particular, the normative standards that are typically used to define scandal change over time and are applied inconsistently—some well-documented transgressions fail to generate much controversy in the media, while other allegations are covered as scandals despite little evidence that norms were violated.¹² In such cases, the political and news context, rather than evidence, often appears to be the decisive factor.

Others are skeptical about whether scandals necessarily entail norm violations and focus instead on the *response* to alleged transgressions.¹³ For instance, Thompson writes that “[s]candal’ refers to actions or events involving certain kinds of transgressions which become known to others and are sufficiently serious to elicit a public response.”¹⁴ While dispensing with a strictly evidence-based definition is useful, these authors tend to rely heavily on public responses to alleged wrongdoing to define scandal, an approach that conflates the existence of elite controversy with the level of public outrage that ultimately results. In reality, while the most salient scandals generate high levels of public awareness and attention, most are not widely known and generate relatively little public interest (e.g., Whitewater).

My theoretical approach helps reconcile the two perspectives described above. I do not rely on

⁹Apostolidis and Williams 2004, pp. 3–4.

¹⁰Markovits and Silverstein 1988, pp. 6-7.

¹¹Bennett 2004, p. 292.

¹²Adut 2005; Entman 2012.

¹³Adut 2005, p. 216.

¹⁴Thompson 2000, p. 13.

evidence alone to define scandals, nor do I assume that scandals can be defined solely by public outrage. Instead, I rely on news coverage, which is essential to contemporary scandal—Waisbord calls it “the barometer that indicates the existence (or absence) of a scandal”.¹⁵ Given the way that reporters tend to index elite opinion,¹⁶ I argue that media *recognition* of a controversy they are covering as a scandal is the best contemporaneous indicator of whether a political figure or government official is widely believed by elites to have acted in a manner that contravenes established moral, political, or procedural norms. I define controversies that have been recognized in this way as *media scandals*.

Though these contextual factors will affect whether a media scandal develops, it is important to be clear that factual evidence of wrongdoing, corruption, or misbehavior will also be associated with the occurrence of media scandals. In particular, the evidence supporting an allegation will sometimes be so compelling that a media scandal will ensue regardless of the context. At the other extreme, certain allegations are so trivial or implausible that they will never be covered as scandals. Most of the time, however, the evidence supporting an actual or potential scandal allegation is relatively ambiguous and can be interpreted in different ways. In such cases, the political and news context will play an important role in whether or how the allegation is promoted by the opposition party and covered by the press for the reasons explained below.

The role of context in media scandal

In this section, I present a theory in which media scandals are a “co-production” of the press and the opposition party. According to this view, the recognition of scandal in the press is not strictly a reflection of ethical transgressions by public figures but a socially constructed event in which the actions (or alleged actions) of a public figure or institution are *successfully construed* as violating ethical norms.¹⁷ As such, while evidence plays an important role in whether any given allegation

¹⁵Waisbord 2004, p. 1079.

¹⁶Bennett 1990; Zaller and Chiu 1996.

¹⁷This theoretical approach helps bridge the gap between two competing perspectives on the occurrence of social and political events such as scandal. For many years, scholars took it as a given that news reporting objectively identified

will become a scandal, the likelihood that an allegation of wrongdoing, corruption, or misbehavior will be portrayed as a scandal in press coverage during a given time period should vary with the political and news context. In some cases, it will only take a spark from a relatively flimsy allegation to set off a significant controversy, while other environments will be much less prone to scandalous conflagrations. I first introduce my theoretical conception of this process before describing two independent factors that I expect will affect the likelihood that it will take place.

Media scandal as a co-production

In contemporary American politics, the opposition party and the elite political media (the national print and television outlets that often set the agenda for the rest of the press) are the two crucial institutional players in creating and sustaining presidential and executive branch scandals.¹⁸ Each group has professional incentives to investigate and publicize alleged misconduct by the president and his administration. When both groups promote an allegation, a scandal will often emerge.¹⁹

First, the opposition party has strong incentives to try to create scandal in order to discredit the president or damage his political standing—what Ginsberg and Shefter call “politics by other means.”²⁰ In addition, scandals can have potentially damaging second-order effects on a party’s brand name, a collective good that the president shares with his fellow co-partisans.²¹ This externality creates an important additional incentive for the opposition to try to foment scandal.

Similarly, the press has become far more willing to engage in aggressive coverage of scandal in

social problems that were worthy of coverage. In this view, news accounts of scandal would be interpreted as resulting from wrongdoing by a public figure. However, critics argued that these processes are inherently socially constructed (Molotch and Lester 1974; Woolgar and Pawluch 1985), with some denying that objective conditions have any effect (Best 1993). A more defensible approach that avoids these two extremes is the “weak or contextual version” of social constructionism proposed by Fine, who interprets the Fatty Arbuckle scandal of 1921–1922 as the partial result of public concern about moral standards in Hollywood (Fine 1997). Likewise, I view political and news context as playing an important but not determinative role in transforming political events into scandals.

¹⁸While this article focuses on presidential scandal in the United States, it has potential applications to state governors as well as presidential and parliamentary governments outside the U.S. See the conclusion for further discussion.

¹⁹Individual media outlets or legislators may of course behave idiosyncratically, but both are part of institutions—a formal institution in the case of parties and an informal one in the case of the press (Cook 2005)—that generate relatively consistent patterns of behavior. For parties, see, e.g., Groeling 2010; Grynaviski 2010; for the press, see, e.g., Crouse 1973, Sabato 1991, pp. 59–61, and Bennett 2004, p. 292.

²⁰Ginsberg and Shefter 2002.

²¹Snyder and Ting 2002; Adut 2005; Groeling 2010; Grynaviski 2010.

recent years, a change that is frequently attributed to the Vietnam War and/or Watergate.²² Breaking news about a major scandal now creates prestige for journalists and can lead to increased consumer interest.²³ As a result, journalists often compete to report about possible misconduct first. After these stories are published, the pressures of pack journalism often generate waves of similar stories.²⁴

When both the press and the opposition party draw attention to an allegation against the president or his administration, the result can be an accelerating sequence of news reports and opposition party criticism that generate a media scandal. For such a process to occur, the participation of both groups is essential. Indeed, the interactions that takes place among the opposition and members of the press as a scandal develops are consistent with the “negotiation of newsworthiness” described by Cook.²⁵ The opposition helps the press “make news” by providing information to reporters and staging news events, while the press helps the opposition by providing exposure for potentially damaging allegations against the president.²⁶

Conversely, it is difficult for the opposition or the press to pursue scandal allegations against the president without the participation of the other group. Most notably, the press tends to avoid pursuing critical stories without cover from the opposition due to its tendency to track conflict among elites.²⁷ Quoting opposition party members thus helps to legitimize reporting on scandal allegations and protect reporters’ reputation for objectivity.²⁸ In contrast, when the opposition does not pursue an allegation, reporters may be reluctant to cover the story due to a lack of sources and the risk of appearing biased. For instance, Entman notes that potential scandals concerning the Bush administration’s connections to Enron and the Florida recount “died in the absence of sustained opposition campaigning or effective uses of political processes.”²⁹ In addition, it is extremely difficult

²²See, e.g., Sabato 1991; Thompson 2000; Farnsworth and Lichter 2006.

²³Thompson 2000, p. 78; see, e.g., Hamilton 2004, pp. 288–289.

²⁴Crouse 1973; Sabato 1991, pp. 59–61; Bennett 2004, p. 292.

²⁵Cook 2005.

²⁶See also the “cascading network activation” model of scandal in Entman 2012.

²⁷Bennett 1990; Zaller and Chiu 1996; Stimson 2004, pp. 146–147.

²⁸Tuchman 1972, p. 668.

²⁹Entman 2004, pp. 292–293. Similarly, local coverage of members of Congress implicated in the Abramoff scandal was found to be concentrated in competitive races and largely consisted of stories citing their challengers, which insulated reporters from criticism. In the absence of a competitive challenger raising the issue, however, the scandal

for the opposition to create a widespread perception of wrongdoing without media coverage.

The exact process by which media scandals originate will necessarily vary. Allegations may be initiated by the media or opposition elites, but they can also originate with interest groups, government watchdogs, or administration whistleblowers. In some cases, the process will be driven by law enforcement or investigative processes such as Congressional committees and special counsels, while others may be fought primarily through the media. In each case, though, the joint participation of the press and opposition is critical to the creation of a media scandal.

What role does the president play in this process? Most notably, the likelihood of media scandal of course depends in part on the availability of potential scandals for the press and opposition party to publicize. Potential targets almost always exist given the relatively weak role that evidence plays in scandal and the president's responsibility for the entire executive branch. However, the supply of potential scandals is surely affected by the actions of the president and his administration and is likely to change over the course of their time in office. For instance, a new president is vulnerable to scandals in the backgrounds of his executive branch nominees but has made few other decisions that could be criticized. Over time, however, his record will grow longer, increasing the set of possible targets. In addition, the likelihood of scandal may vary across administrations due to differences in ethics, reputation, or political skill. Finally, the White House may try to prevent scandals or limit their magnitude, but the extent of damage control and its likelihood of success will largely depend on the available evidence (discussed above) and the political and news context (see below).

The role of context in scandal

When will media scandals be most likely to occur? The process is, of course, stochastic—for instance, the supply of allegations that can be publicized without generating libel or slander lawsuits will vary idiosyncratically.³⁰ However, contextual factors will have systematic effects on the in-

received little attention. See Fogarty 2013.

³⁰Again, I do not focus on allegations of wrongdoing as a theoretical or empirical factor. For the purposes of this study, they are an endogenous mechanism in the scandal-generating process, not a causal effect of interest. Other factors that may affect the supply of potential scandals are discussed further below.

centives of the media and the opposition, whom I expect to weigh the costs of investigating and publicizing scandal allegations against the likelihood of successfully creating a scandal,³¹ and will thereby affect the likelihood of them jointly helping to create a media scandal. Specifically, I focus on two contextual factors that should independently affect the likelihood of media scandal—approval of the president among opposition party identifiers and the level of congestion in the news agenda. In each case, our interest is in the effect of the contextual factor in question on the likelihood and intensity of scandal, which should be null if evidence is the only factor of significance.

Opposition approval

A number of recent studies have found that contemporary legislators are highly responsive to partisan, activist, and primary constituencies.³² Given the partisan nature of scandal in the post-Watergate era, I expect parties to be especially responsive to demand for scandal from their supporters, which should vary depending on opposition identifiers' feelings toward the president. When opposition identifiers are hostile to the president, for instance, the literatures on motivated reasoning³³ and public opinion about scandal³⁴ suggest that they should be more interested in and supportive of scandal allegations against the president and less sensitive to the evidentiary basis for these claims. Under these circumstances, I expect that opposition elites will be more likely to pursue scandal allegations to meet the demand for negative information about the president from their base. By contrast, during periods when opposition identifiers are more supportive of the president such as “honeymoons,” foreign policy crises, and the initial stages of wars,³⁵ they should be less interested in and inclined to believe allegations against the president. As a result, the opposition party should reduce the flow of negative messages,³⁶ including scandal allegations or investigations and statements that could lead to scandals. (Consider, for instance, the change in how Democrats treated George W. Bush after the 9/11 terrorist attacks.) This reduction in negative information flow about

³¹Szasz 1986; Fogarty 2008, p. 449.

³²See, e.g., Clinton 2006; Brady, Han, and Pope 2007; Layman et al. 2010.

³³See, e.g., Kunda 1990; Redlawsk 2002; Taber and Lodge 2006.

³⁴See, e.g., Fischle 2000; Blais et al. 2010.

³⁵Lebo and Cassino 2007; Newman and Forcehimes 2010.

³⁶Brody 1991.

the president should lead to a corresponding shift toward more positive mainstream news coverage due to the media's tendency to reflect levels of elite conflict.³⁷ As such, we would expect fewer stories about scandals, scandal allegations, or potential scandals when opposition identifier approval is relatively high.

Support for the president among opposition party identifiers is also likely to directly affect scandal coverage by the press, which has been found to be responsive to audience demand despite prevailing norms within journalism.³⁸ Opposition identifiers are the most receptive audience for presidential scandal news and thus likely to influence how scandal allegations are covered. However, the literatures on motivated reasoning and public responses to scandal discussed above suggest that opposition identifiers' demand for scandal news should vary depending on their feelings toward the president. When the other party's base is more supportive of the president (as in the case of honeymoons³⁹ and foreign policy crises), demand for negative news about the president from the media—including scandals—should decrease.⁴⁰ Conversely, as approval decreases among opposition identifiers, demand for scandal reporting and other negative coverage should increase.⁴¹

Finally, as noted earlier, the press and the opposition party have a symbiotic relationship; neither can generate a scandal alone. Because both groups face similar incentives, I hypothesize that the likelihood of jointly generating the positive feedback dynamics that create a scandal will vary depending on the president's standing with the opposition party:

³⁷Bennett 1990; Stimson 2004, pp. 146–147.

³⁸See, e.g., Hamilton 2004; Gentzkow and Shapiro 2010; Puglisi and Snyder 2011. While journalists may not always closely peruse the cross-tabs of job approval surveys, the opposition party's feelings about the president are typically clear to political observers. For instance, Bill Clinton averaged 23% approval in Gallup polls among Republicans during his first year in office (Jones 2010)—by far the lowest of any modern president to that point. It was widely understood at the time that Clinton was dogged by low opposition support in a polarized political environment (see, e.g., Cannon 1993).

³⁹There is some evidence that the magnitude of the honeymoon effect in presidential approval and favorable news coverage has declined in the contemporary period (e.g., Jacobson 2003; Farnsworth and Lichter 2004).

⁴⁰Brody 1991.

⁴¹Corroborating evidence is available from Clayman et al. 2007, who find that reporters are more adversarial toward the president when unemployment and interest rates are higher. (They find that presidential approval does not significantly improve the fit of their model, but that is likely an artifact of the correlation between approval and the economic variables they include as predictors.) Entman also states that news slant is more negative when the president is less popular (Entman 1989), though conflicting findings have been reported on the relationship between approval and negativity in presidential news coverage (Cohen 2008; Cohen 2009).

H1: As support for the president among opposition party identifiers increases, the likelihood of scandal should decrease.

However, I make no predictions about the effect of support for the president among opposition identifiers on the magnitude or intensity of scandal. The most significant scandals have tended to occur during presidents' second terms in office.⁴² Because presidents who have higher approval ratings are more likely to be re-elected,⁴³ the relationship between opposition approval and scandal magnitude or intensity is confounded. (We don't observe the second terms of presidents who are sufficiently unpopular that they are not re-elected.)

Congestion of the news agenda

A second contextual factor that may affect the occurrence of media scandal is congestion in the news agenda. While the "slow news" claim may be familiar, its implications for understanding the nature and causes of media scandal are less well understood. In particular, the slow news hypothesis suggests that the likelihood of a presidential media scandal during a given time period is not just a function of the available evidence of wrongdoing but also the news context during that period.

To understand the effects of news context on scandal coverage, it is necessary to consider how media outlets allocate resources. Each outlet has a limited number of journalists and a finite amount of space in which to present stories. The attention devoted to a particular story thus depends on the context in which it occurs.⁴⁴ In particular, when few major stories are available, the opportunity costs of scandal coverage are low. As such, media outlets are more likely to investigate and report on potential scandals involving the president or his administration and to give more prominent placement to those stories that they do report. Qualitative research and journalistic reports have frequently attributed scandals to slow news periods for this reason.⁴⁵ For instance, Howard Kurtz of the *Washington Post* suggested that a 1991 controversy involving White House chief of staff John

⁴²Shogan 2006.

⁴³See, e.g., Abramowitz 2008.

⁴⁴Entman 1989, p. 52.

⁴⁵See, e.g., Allen 1982; Cook 1991; Kurtz 1991; Sabato 1991; Smith and Smith 1994; Green 2002.

Sununu was exacerbated by it taking place during “a slow news period”.⁴⁶

By contrast, when the news agenda is congested, the opportunity costs of covering a given story will increase. Eisensee and Strömberg demonstrate this effect in a study showing that external events frequently crowd out media coverage of foreign disasters.⁴⁷ Political scandals, which actually generate relatively low levels of public interest,⁴⁸ are similarly vulnerable to news congestion. Busy news periods will thus reduce the likelihood that mainstream news outlets will pursue scandal coverage or give it prominent placement. For example, the drumbeat of post-9/11 news helped to protect “scandal-plagued” Army Secretary Thomas White for much of 2002.⁴⁹ Similarly, the buildup to the Iraq war may have helped crowd out the “potential scandal” of the Bush administration’s ties to the corporate scandals of 2001–2002.⁵⁰

Congestion of the news agenda will also affect the behavior of the opposition party and the press. When another story is dominating the news, both groups will be less likely to promote allegations of wrongdoing for fear of being drowned out by other news stories, reducing the supply of potential scandal coverage. By contrast, opportunistic reporters and politicians are more likely to promote a possible scandal during a slow news period when few competing stories exist.

As such, I hypothesize that slow news periods can foment scandals, while high levels of news pressure can crowd out potential scandals:

H2: As the news agenda becomes more congested, the likelihood and intensity of scandal should decrease. Correspondingly, when fewer competing news stories are available, the likelihood and intensity of scandal should increase.

It is important to note that my theory does not specifically predict that the effect of news pressure is moderated by opposition approval (or vice versa)—I expect both factors to have independent effects on media scandal. I therefore do not offer such a hypothesis or test interaction terms below.

⁴⁶Kurtz 1991.

⁴⁷Eisensee and Strömberg 2007.

⁴⁸Robinson 2007.

⁴⁹Green 2002.

⁵⁰Farnsworth and Lichter 2006, p. 132.

Data and methods

This section introduces the variables used in the statistical analysis and explains how they are derived from the theory presented above. It also introduces the duration modeling and instrumental variables approaches used in the statistical analysis, which examines the relationship between the political and news context (the independent variables of interest) and the onset and intensity of media scandal (the outcome variables of interest) in a given time period (week).⁵¹

Dependent variables: Scandal onset and intensity

I construct two types of dependent variables for the entire 1977–2008 period: *scandal onset*, which measures whether a media scandal starts in a given week, and *scandal intensity*, which measures the volume of coverage of a media scandal in a given week. In each case, I do not disaggregate the dependent variable by type of scandal (e.g., sexual, financial, etc.); target (White House or elsewhere in the executive branch); or characteristics of the allegation (e.g., public or private behavior, whether the actions took place before the official took office, etc.). Though these distinctions can be important,⁵² disaggregating the data further would simply leave us with too few media scandals of each type to analyze statistically. More importantly, while various sorts of heterogeneity are possible, the political and news context is likely to play a similar role across all of these cases. For instance, even when the president is not directly responsible for a given controversy (e.g., a dispute over actions taken within the executive branch), he is held *politically* responsible for scandals and expected to address any problems that have been revealed. Moreover, his vulnerability to scandal of all types will increase as the political and news context become less favorable in the manner that I describe below.

⁵¹It is impossible to measure or even conceptualize the universe of possible scandals, which would need to include not just all the allegations that don't become media scandals, but the *possible* allegations that are not made and the transgressions that are *not observed*. (The observed set of allegations or transgressions is likely to be affected by the independent variables of interest. Conditioning on them could therefore induce post-treatment bias.) As such, there is no way to estimate a model predicting which allegations or transgressions become scandals, nor is it possible to directly estimate the effects of political and news context—which vary over time—in such a framework.

⁵²See, e.g., Funk 1996; Doherty, Dowling, and Miller 2011; Basinger 2013.

The first dependent variable is media scandal onset—a binary measure of whether a major new media scandal was *recognized* as such by the press in a given week. Analyzing the predictors of this dependent variable will help us determine the conditions under which a media scandal is likely to emerge. In this sense, my measure of media scandal onset is no different than analyses of other binary event indicators of latent continuous processes such as interstate and civil wars or regime transitions. It would of course be desirable to analyze the full sequence of events that takes place during each scandal (including the actions of third party groups, the making of scandal allegations, Congressional and independent counsel investigations, etc.), but that process is highly complex and frequently unobservable. In addition, many of the mechanisms of scandal, including the presidential response strategies discussed by Basinger and Rottinghaus, are intermediate outcomes whose occurrence is likely to be endogenous.⁵³ Similarly, too few scandals exist under any reasonable definition to estimate an adequate statistical model of their duration. I therefore analyze a measure of scandal intensity below.

The measures of scandal used in this study are constructed from data on mainstream media coverage of scandal. In particular, my primary measure of scandal onset tracks when news reporting first describes a controversy involving the president or executive branch as a “scandal” in the reporter’s voice. Because journalists tend to index elite opinion⁵⁴—particularly on sensitive issues like allegations of governmental wrongdoing—the use of the term “scandal” in news reporting is a useful contemporaneous measure of elite perceptions. If reporters index elite opinion in their use of the term “scandal,” then the transition to using the term is a theoretically meaningful event. While some may object to my focus on journalistic terminology, reporters are highly systematic in their use of pejorative terms and tend to follow elites in their use of those terms. For instance, Bennett, Lawrence, and Livingston argue that the media’s failure to use the term “torture” in coverage of prisoner treatment at Abu Ghraib was the result of the lack of “a consistent and organized political

⁵³Basinger and Rottinghaus 2012. George W. Bush, for instance, took a far different approach to damage control in the immediate post-9/11 period (when he enjoyed high news congestion and high opposition approval ratings) than at the end of his time in office.

⁵⁴Bennett 1990; Zaller and Chiu 1996.

opposition” making such an argument.⁵⁵

In this case, the pattern of usage of the term “scandal” is consistent with the indexing hypothesis, which suggests that its use is an important reflection of real-world dynamics in Washington. Some controversies that were widely viewed as scandals were almost immediately described as such (e.g., Abu Ghraib) while other controversies that were not broadly seen as scandals were described in other terms (e.g., pre-war Bush administration claims about Iraqi weapons of mass destruction). To take one example, the *Washington Post* studiously avoided using the term “scandal” to describe Whitewater in almost two hundred news reports between October 31, 1993 and June 8, 1994—language that reflected the state of the controversy at the time. However, as the allegations became more prominent, the *Post* shifted its language and used the word “scandal,” which captured the new political reality.

To measure this construct, I follow Meinke and Anderson in using the *Washington Post* as a proxy for scandal coverage in the national mainstream media.⁵⁶ The *Post* is an influential outlet whose coverage of national politics—including scandals—often sets the agenda for reporters nationwide.⁵⁷ For instance, a 2003 *New York Times* report on the controversy over the disclosure of Valerie Plame’s identity stated, “*The Washington Post* published a prominent article on the front page, one mark of a burgeoning scandal here”.⁵⁸ Using *Post* articles published between 1977 and 2008,⁵⁹ I determine the first time the *Post* published a front-page story focusing on a controversy concerning the president and executive branch that described it as a scandal in the reporter’s voice or headline, a precise and replicable approach designed to minimize false positives and subjectiv-

⁵⁵Bennett, Lawrence, and Livingston 2006.

⁵⁶Meinke and Anderson 2001.

⁵⁷Many observers believe that the national media has become more divided along ideological lines, but this trend is relatively recent. Fox News Channel, for instance, only reached a median primetime viewership of one million viewers in 2002 (Holcomb, Mitchell, and Rosenstiel 2011). For the vast majority of the 1977–2008 period covered by my data, mainstream news coverage was much more frequently characterized by—and criticized for—“pack journalism,” especially in its coverage of presidential scandal (Crouse 1973; Sabato 1991, pp. 59–61; Bennett 2004, p. 292). These similar patterns of coverage reflect institutional norms that are shared within the press (Cook 2005).

⁵⁸Rosenbaum 2003.

⁵⁹These articles were collected from the Nexis news database, which only includes *Post* articles published since January 1, 1977. After these data were collected, ProQuest Historical Newspapers made *Post* content available for the 1877–1995 period, but the coding procedure described in Appendix A cannot be replicated in their database.

ity.⁶⁰ This restriction helps identify the most salient controversies at the point at which they are prominently recognized as media scandals,⁶¹ the outcome of interest. In particular, as former CBS anchor Dan Rather noted, front-page coverage in the *Post* and other prominent newspapers tends to drive television coverage: “If the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, or the *Los Angeles Times* runs a front-page story...the heat’s on to run it and we usually do”.⁶² The 28 media scandals identified using this approach, which are listed in Appendix A, correspond closely with other accounts and popular perceptions, suggesting that the reporters’ use of the term is a meaningful indication of perceived presidential or executive branch wrongdoing.

When scandals occur, what determines whether they set off a wild feeding frenzy⁶³ or quickly fizzle? Because too few media scandals exist under the definition presented above to estimate a statistical model of their duration, I instead use the *Post* data to create a longitudinal measure of the volume of scandal coverage, which serves as a proxy for the overall magnitude or intensity of scandal in a given time period. I measure this concept by summing the number of front-page articles describing a controversy involving the president or executive branch as a scandal by week. The resulting time series, which is plotted in Online Appendix A, corresponds closely to qualitative observations of presidential scandal magnitude in the post-Watergate era.

Independent variables

Opposition approval

I operationalize H1 using approval of the president among opposition party identifiers. To measure this variable, I employ data from Lebo and Cassino and Fox measuring the proportion of Republican and Democratic identifiers (not including leaners) who approve of the president in Gallup or CBS/*New York Times* data.⁶⁴ Data for this variable, which are available at the monthly level, were

⁶⁰Inter-coder reliability for scandal coding was very good (95% agreement among three coders, Krippendorff’s Alpha=0.78) The procedure used for coding article focus also showed high reliability (92% agreement among two coders, Krippendorff’s Alpha=0.84). Appendix A provides further details.

⁶¹Sabato 1991, p. 134.

⁶²Sabato 1991, p. 134.

⁶³Sabato 1991.

⁶⁴Lebo and Cassino 2007; Fox 2009.

lagged by one month to guard against endogeneity.⁶⁵

News pressure

The other primary independent variable of interest is congestion in the news agenda, which I use to test H2. My measure of this variable, which is derived from Eisensee and Strömberg, measures the average length of the first three segments of the network newscasts (in minutes) at the weekly level for 1977–2008.⁶⁶ Unlike newspaper front pages (which feature a largely static number of stories), this measure varies widely in response to events—when important news breaks, the networks devote much of their broadcast to that story. By contrast, they present a larger number of short segments during slow news periods. The resulting variable appears to have high face validity, showing spikes during events such as the September 11 attacks and the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Given the prevalence of pack journalism among elite news sources,⁶⁷ it is very likely that this news pressure indicator is a valid measure of the presence or absence of significant competing stories for all forms of elite mainstream outlets, including the *Post* and other newspapers. (A graph of the measure and further details on how it was constructed are provided in Online Appendix C.)

Control variables

In addition to opposition approval and news pressure, I also control for other variables that may affect the incidence and magnitude of scandal but are not central to the theoretical or empirical focus of this study.

First, I include an indicator for divided government. Opposition party control of one or both chambers of Congress may increase the likelihood of scandal because the opposition can use Con-

⁶⁵When a week included days from two months, the approval rating for the month in which the median day from that week took place (i.e., Wednesday) was used. To avoid dropping data, each new president's first recorded value for opposition approval is treated as the lagged value for their initial time in office when lagged values are missing. Values were linearly interpolated for later months in which approval data were missing (Lebo and Cassino 2007, p. 727). A plot of lagged approval ratings for opposition party identifiers as well as independents and identifiers of the president's party is provided in Online Appendix B.

⁶⁶Eisensee and Strömberg 2007.

⁶⁷Crouse 1973; Sabato 1991, pp. 59–61; Bennett 2004, p. 292.

gressional committees to investigate the executive branch,⁶⁸ though empirical evidence on this point is mixed.⁶⁹ Divided government also appears to have played a key role in keeping the independent counsel statute in force, which could also lead to more scandals.⁷⁰ Finally, the press is likely to provide greater coverage of opposition party criticism of the president under divided government,⁷¹ which could result in greater coverage of scandal allegations and thus more scandal.

A second possible factor is the existence of a U.S.-led foreign war, which may divert attention from domestic politics and increase the costs of making allegations against the president. I therefore include an indicator variable that takes a value of 1 for major U.S. wars and foreign interventions.⁷²

In addition, several trends that are highly correlated with time may have increased the prevalence of scandal in this period, though it is not possible to separate their effects. First, growing polarization may be associated with more frequent opposition scandal allegations,⁷³ more intensive Congressional investigation,⁷⁴ and larger audiences for ideological outlets such as talk radio. Similarly, the rise of cable news or other factors may have fueled an apparent trend toward greater scandal coverage in the press.⁷⁵ The rise of the Internet may also have helped create more scandals as audiences for websites like the Drudge Report have grown. Unfortunately, as Cohen notes, Congressional polarization and cable television audiences are so strongly confounded with time that we cannot distinguish among them ($r > .90$ in each case).⁷⁶ The number of Americans with Internet access is similarly confounded with these factors ($r > .80$ in each case; all results available upon request). It is simply not possible to fully disentangle these variables in longitudinal data. I

⁶⁸See, e.g., Ginsberg and Shefter 2002.

⁶⁹Mayhew 2005; Kriner and Schwartz 2008; Parker and Dull 2009; Parker and Dull 2013.

⁷⁰Because the independent counsel was only in effect for six months under unified government after 1980 (July–December 1994), it is not possible to adequately separate the effects of the statute from divided government more generally. I thus omit an independent counsel statute indicator from the models below. As I discuss below, however, the results are not sensitive to its inclusion (details available upon request).

⁷¹Groeling 2010.

⁷²Specifically, the war variable takes a value of 1 for the weeks that include the invasions of Grenada (October 23–29, 1983) and Panama (December 17, 1989–January 6, 1990), the first Gulf War from the blockade to the end of hostilities (August 12, 1990–March 2, 1991), the war in Afghanistan from the initiation of bombing through Operation Anaconda (October 7, 2001–March 9, 2002), and the war in Iraq from the U.S. invasion through the end of George W. Bush's second term (March 16, 2003–December 31, 2008).

⁷³Ginsberg and Shefter 2002.

⁷⁴Kriner and Schwartz 2008.

⁷⁵Kalb 1998.

⁷⁶Cohen 2008, pp. 100–101.

therefore include a simple time trend for years since 1976 that should account for all of these highly correlated factors, though I note that my results are not sensitive to adding any of these measures as a separate variable in the robustness tests below.⁷⁷

An additional possible factor is the political calendar. When Congress is in session, opposition party members may be more likely to promote scandal allegations than during recess, a time in which they are typically attending to their constituents. The media may also be more likely to cover scandal allegations when Congress is in session if the opposition party makes floor speeches or holds committee hearings on the subject. I therefore control for the number of calendar days the House of Representatives is in session in each week.⁷⁸

Finally, the population of potential scandals may vary *across* presidencies due to differences in the characteristics, behavior, or reputation of presidents or their administrations. I therefore include presidential fixed effects (including conditional logit, which avoids the bias and inconsistency that can result from including fixed effects in a standard logit model) in the models below to account for differences in misconduct or vulnerability to scandal between administrations.⁷⁹

Accounting for duration dependence

In the first part of the results section below, I analyze media scandal onset by week for the 1977–2008 period.⁸⁰ This binary variable measures whether a scandal was first recognized in a given

⁷⁷The time trend could also account for concerns about declining presidential approval among opposition identifiers over time. Approval ratings of George W. Bush among Democratic identifiers did reach historic lows in his second term, but the time trend is only modestly correlated with lagged opposition approval overall ($r = -.28$).

⁷⁸This variable is measured as the proportion of the days of the week that the chamber was in session. I use the House because Senate data are not available electronically for 1977. Measures for the two chambers are highly correlated ($r = .83$) so this choice should not affect my results.

⁷⁹As discussed below, the results are also robust to the inclusion of various additional control variables including the independent counsel statute; an election year indicator; years since 1976 squared (to account for a potential non-linear time trend); the percentage of households with cable television or Internet access; the number of cable news subscribers; or the distance between the party medians in Common Space DW-NOMINATE (Poole and Rosenthal 1997; Poole and Rosenthal 2007).

⁸⁰In all of the analyses presented in this paper, the incoming president is treated as being at risk of scandal starting in the first week of January during the month in which he assumes office. Presidential nominees are often targeted by scandal allegations during this late stage of the transition process.

week.⁸¹ These data can therefore be analyzed as a discrete-time survival model in which the subjects (presidents) can suffer from the event of interest (scandal onset) more than once during their lifetime (time in office). Because each president in the data suffers more than one scandal, the model estimates the factors that are associated with scandals occurring more or less frequently.

In such a model, it is necessary to account for the possibility that the risk of scandal in a given time interval may be related to the length of time elapsed since the last scandal. Failing to account for such a pattern, which is known as duration dependence, can generate incorrect standard errors.⁸² To address this concern, I estimate what are known as conditional gap time models⁸³ in discrete time, which accounts for the time since the president's last scandal. Using this approach, which assumes that the president is not at risk for his *i*th scandal until scandal *i*-1 has already occurred, I account for the likelihood that pressure is likely to build for the opposition and press to uncover wrongdoing as the time since the last scandal increases. When a new scandal is discovered, this pressure is alleviated as “scandal fever” gives way to “scandal fatigue,” but the pressure then again builds over time. I parameterize this risk in the models reported below using polynomials for time since the last scandal, which Carter and Signorino recommend using to account for duration dependence instead of splines due to their greater flexibility and ease of interpretation.⁸⁴

However, the data display clear temporal variation over the course of the president's tenure as well—most notably in the frequency of major second-term scandals. These fluctuations may correspond to possible differences in the supply of potential scandals discussed above (e.g., the number of executive branch nominees). I therefore also include flexible polynomials of presidential tenure in each model to account for possible non-linear changes in the likelihood of scandal over the course of a chief executive's time in office.⁸⁵ While we lack reliable data that can be used to quantify the population of potential scandals in a given time period, these polynomials will account for any

⁸¹Each scandal can only be “new” once. In a single case (March 14–20, 1999), two closely related scandals concerning alleged Chinese nuclear espionage and improper technology transfers were recognized in the same week.

⁸²Box-Steffensmeier and Jones 1997; Beck, Katz, and Tucker 1998.

⁸³Prentice, Williams, and Peterson 1981.

⁸⁴Carter and Signorino 2010. The time since last scandal term is calculated as the number of weeks divided by 52 (an approximation due to leap years). The cubic terms are divided by 10 to ease interpretation of coefficients.

⁸⁵These are calculated in fractions of a year in the same manner as the time since last scandal variables. Both cubic terms are again divided by 10 to ease interpretation.

(possibly non-linear) changes in the supply of possible scandals over the course of a president's time in office as well as differences in the likelihood of successfully generating media scandals at different points in that tenure. With these terms included in my statistical models, the likelihood of scandal onset or intensity should be conditionally independent of a president's time in office and any corresponding changes in the supply of potential scandals.⁸⁶

Instrumental variables model specification

As noted above, we would like to estimate the effect of news pressure on the dependent variables of media scandal onset and intensity, but this relationship is almost surely endogenous. As the volume of coverage of presidential scandal increases, overall news pressure is also likely to increase. In addition, the president may try to strategically create news to divert attention away from stories he does not want covered (the “distraction hypothesis”⁸⁷), which could include a potential or ongoing scandal. For instance, Farnsworth notes that Bill Clinton's trip to China during the Monica Lewinsky scandal generated numerous positive news stories.⁸⁸ Clinton was also accused of conducting military strikes to distract from the Lewinsky scandal.⁸⁹

To address these concerns, I create an exogenous news events variable to serve as an instrument for weekly news pressure. Specifically, I create an indicator variable for the most severe mass shootings, hurricanes, celebrity deaths, earthquakes, mass suicides, and plane crashes as defined by objective criteria and third-party sources. These events should create an exogenous shock to news

⁸⁶While it might seem desirable to directly account for evidence of wrongdoing, it is not clear how to do so. First, such evidence is not easily quantified, nor does it map cleanly into the time series data I analyze (my unit of analysis in this study is a calendar week, not an allegation). Also, as I discuss above, *observed* evidence (or even the existence of an allegation) is likely to be endogenous to the likelihood of scandal onset or scandal intensity. I therefore exclude covariates related to evidence or allegations from the models that follow.

⁸⁷Cohen 2009.

⁸⁸Farnsworth 2009, p. 86.

⁸⁹York 2001. Similar statistical concerns apply to efforts to account for presidential damage control efforts more generally. Controlling for the use of such strategies could induce post-treatment bias if presidents are more likely to engage in damage control in unfavorable political and news environments, which seems likely (King and Zeng 2006). Moreover, if damage control strategies are more likely to be used as the likelihood of scandal increases, controlling for their usage will also create endogeneity bias. I instead provide results from conditional logit and presidential fixed effects to account for possible differences in damage control skill between administrations.

pressure without otherwise affecting the likelihood of presidential scandal.⁹⁰ I restrict my sample to U.S. events because these are more likely to draw public interest and thus media coverage.⁹¹ The resulting set of news events, which are listed in Appendix B along with further details on the coding procedure, includes many of the most dramatic disasters and tragedies of recent decades.⁹² (See Online Appendix D for more evidence supporting the IV assumptions.)

In the models below, I use the exogenous news event indicator to estimate instrumental variables regression models of scandal onset and intensity testing H2.⁹³ By testing two outcome variables that differ in both their conceptual definitions and empirical distributions, I demonstrate that my findings are robust to variation in the assumptions employed for each specific model.

The models of scandal onset O_t and intensity I_t in week t and month m that test H2 are specified as

$$O_t = \beta_0 + \beta_1 A_{m-1} + \beta_2 N_t + \mathbf{X}_t \beta^\sim + \varepsilon_t \quad (1)$$

$$I_t = \beta_0 + \beta_1 A_{m-1} + \beta_2 N_t + \mathbf{X}_t \beta^\sim + \varepsilon_t \quad (2)$$

where A_{m-1} represents the value of opposition approval in the previous month, N_t represents the value of news pressure during that week, and \mathbf{X}_t is a vector of control variables, including the polynomials accounting for duration dependence described above. For expositional clarity, I separate the constant β_0 , the coefficients for opposition approval β_1 and news pressure β_2 , and the coefficient vector β^\sim , which represents the coefficients for the control variables in the model.

⁹⁰By contrast, events such as terrorist attacks or wars might affect the likelihood of scandal directly (by, say, inhibiting criticism of the president) and thereby violate the exclusion restriction required for my instrumental variables model to provide a valid estimate of the effect of news pressure on scandal.

⁹¹See, e.g., Robinson 2007.

⁹²Events occurring in the last two days of a given week were coded as taking place in the subsequent week except for hurricanes, which are often covered most intensely before landfall (which I code as the date of occurrence). While I assume that the effect of the news event on scandal is felt in the week in which it takes place, all results are robust to instrumenting for the previous week's news pressure using a lagged events variable (details available upon request).

⁹³While discrete time survival data are typically modeled using a generalized linear model for binary data, the conditional (fixed effects) logit model used to test H1 below cannot incorporate instrumental variables. While IV probit models are available that omit fixed effects, these depend on strong distributional assumptions (Cameron and Trivedi 2010, p. 481). Angrist and Pischke argue that OLS and IV regression models make fewer assumptions and are more robust to departures from those assumptions than their GLM counterparts (Angrist and Pischke 2009, pp. 197–198). Finally, the exogenous news events instrumental variable perfectly predicts the outcome variable (i.e., no scandal begins in the weeks in which exogenous news events occur), which causes serious estimation problems for IV probit models.

Because news pressure may be endogenous, the IV models estimate the first-stage equation

$$N_t = \gamma_0 + \gamma_1 A_{m-1} + \gamma_2 E_t + \mathbf{X}_t \gamma + \omega_t \quad (3)$$

where γ_2 represents the coefficient for the exogenous events indicator E_t and the other γ coefficients are defined analogously to the β terms in Equations 1 and 2. The key coefficient of interest for testing H2 is β_2 , which will be consistently estimated by the IV regression models if the news events indicator is uncorrelated with ε_t and ω_t and if the model meets the assumptions discussed in Online Appendix D. Both the OLS and IV models are estimated with standard errors that are robust to arbitrary heteroscedasticity⁹⁴ and autocorrelation. These models also include an indicator for peak hurricane season to ensure that the instrument is conditionally uncorrelated with the error term.

Results

This section presents the results of statistical models testing the hypotheses presented above about the effects of political and news context on media scandal. If my theory is correct, then presidential approval among opposition identifiers and congestion of the news agenda should be negatively related to the onset and intensity of scandal. By contrast, if evidence is the sole cause of scandal, the effects of these contextual factors should be null.

Scandal onset

To test my hypotheses about the relationship between political and news context and media scandal onset, I estimate two pairs of models in Table 1.

The first and second columns report models testing H1, which predicts that the likelihood of scandal onset will decrease as the president becomes more popular with opposition party identifiers. These models exclude the news pressure variable because of the risk of inducing endogeneity bias

⁹⁴Linear probability models must be estimated with robust standard errors to account for heteroscedasticity (Cameron and Trivedi 2010, p. 485).

Table 1: Models of media scandal onset 1977–2008 (weekly data)

	H1: Opposition approval		H2: News pressure	
	Cond. logit	OLS	OLS	IV reg.
Opposition approval (lag)	-3.367** (1.379)	-0.046** ($p = .031$)	-0.048** (0.022)	-0.040* (0.022)
News pressure			0.002* (0.001)	-0.008*** (0.003)
Divided government	1.231*** (0.292)	0.016 ($p = .443$)	0.015 (0.011)	0.018 (0.011)
War	0.910 (0.732)	0.004 ($p = .803$)	0.000 (0.009)	0.018* (0.010)
Years after 1976	-0.107 (0.931)	-0.002 ($p = .955$)	-0.002 (0.011)	-0.003 (0.012)
Years in office	-3.682*** (0.602)	-0.032** ($p = .031$)	-0.032* (0.017)	-0.030* (0.017)
Years in office ²	1.391*** (0.133)	0.012** ($p = .029$)	0.012** (0.005)	0.012** (0.005)
Years in office ³ /10	-1.351*** (0.166)	-0.012** ($p = .031$)	-0.012*** (0.004)	-0.011*** (0.004)
Years between scandals	4.180** (2.046)	0.067 ($p = .221$)	0.072* (0.041)	0.051 (0.040)
Years between scandals ²	-3.341 (2.159)	-0.065 ($p = .223$)	-0.071 (0.051)	-0.048 (0.050)
Years between scandals ³ /10	8.956 (5.712)	0.204 ($p = .221$)	0.220 (0.162)	0.155 (0.161)
House days in session	0.201 (0.489)	0.001 ($p = .847$)	0.002 (0.010)	0.001 (0.010)
Hurricane peak			-0.002 (0.007)	0.003 (0.008)
Presidential fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Standard errors	Clustered (pres.)	Clustered (wild bootstrap)	HAC (bw=4)	HAC (bw=4)
Instrument for news pressure				Exogenous news events
First-stage F				14.76
N	1670	1670	1670	1670

* $p < .10$; ** $p < .05$; *** $p < .01$. Conditional logit results include standard errors clustered by president. The OLS results in the second column include p -values clustered by president computed using the wild bootstrap (Cameron, Gelbach, and Miller 2008). I conduct 1,000 bootstrap replications, following their recommendation to impose the null hypothesis. The third and fourth columns present results with standard errors that are robust to arbitrary heteroscedasticity and autocorrelation (HAC) with a bandwidth of 4 weeks. IV regression results estimated using two-stage least squares. Constant omitted for the OLS model in the second column (not estimated for models in first, third, and fourth columns due to conditional logit/IV fixed effects).

in the estimates for opposition approval.⁹⁵ (I discuss the models testing H2, which appear in the third and fourth columns, separately below.)

Given that the outcome is binary, my preferred estimate for H1 comes from a conditional logit model predicting scandal onset in the first column, which is the logistic equivalent of a regression model with fixed effects for each president.⁹⁶ Given concerns about interdependence in outcomes during a president's tenure, I employ robust standard errors clustered by president. With only five presidents in the data, however, clustered standard errors may be too optimistic.⁹⁷ To account for this issue, I also perform a robustness check in which I estimate a linear probability model with clustered standard errors computed using the wild bootstrap procedure, which performs adequately with as few as five clusters.⁹⁸ The results of this robustness check, which also include presidential fixed effects, are presented in the second column of Table 1.

As H1 predicts, the lagged opposition approval term is negative and statistically significant in each of these models, suggesting that increased support for the president among opposition party identifiers decreases the subsequent likelihood of scandal.⁹⁹ To illustrate the magnitude of the estimated relationship (which is difficult to assess when comparing conditional logit and OLS models), I estimate the predicted effects of opposition approval on the likelihood of scandal onset in a realistic counterfactual scenario. On September 30, 2003, the Justice Department announced an investigation into the leak of CIA operative Valerie Plame's name. President Bush's approval rating among Democrats was 16% that month. Not surprisingly, the controversy quickly became a scandal and was recognized as such in the *Post* during the week of October 6–11. I consider a counterfactual scenario in which a new crisis returned Democratic approval of Bush to its post-9/11 peak of 80% in September. Setting aside the specifics of the Plame case, what would be the effects of such a

⁹⁵Including news pressure in the model testing H1 could also induce post-treatment bias in the estimate of the effect of opposition party approval if it affects news pressure (for instance, during wars or foreign policy crises).

⁹⁶Generalized linear models for binary dependent variables such as logit and probit are relatively interchangeable in discrete time survival models (Beck, Katz, and Tucker 1998).

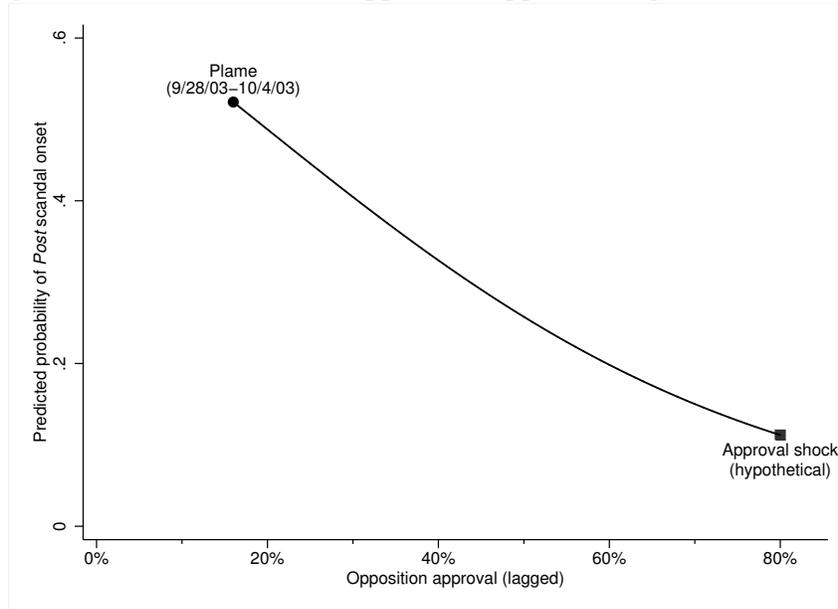
⁹⁷Cameron, Gelbach, and Miller 2008. The opposition approval coefficient in the conditional logit model remains statistically significant with robust standard errors that are not clustered by president, however (available upon request).

⁹⁸Cameron, Gelbach, and Miller 2008.

⁹⁹By contrast, lagged overall approval is not consistently significant, nor is lagged approval among independents or identifiers of the president's party (results available upon request).

boost in lagged opposition approval on the likelihood of scandal? The results of simulations using the conditional logit model from Table 1 are presented in Figure 1. Under this scenario, the predicted probability of scandal is dramatically reduced from 52% in the Plame scenario to 11% in the counterfactual—an almost five-fold decrease.

Figure 1: Predicted effect of opposition approval surge: Valerie Plame



Predicted probabilities from the conditional logit model in Table 1 of the effect of a shock to lagged opposition approval with other variables held at their actual values for October 6–11, 2003. The presidential fixed effect is assumed to be zero, an assumption which is necessary to estimate out-of-sample predicted probabilities from a conditional logit model with more than one positive outcome per unit.

The negative relationship between media scandal onset and lagged presidential approval among opposition party identifiers withstands an extensive series of robustness tests (all results available upon request). For instance, the results remain statistically significant if the opposition approval measure is lagged by two calendar months instead of one. The results in the first two columns are also robust to the inclusion of various control variables including the independent counsel statute; an election year indicator; years since 1976 squared (to account for a potential non-linear time trend); the percentage of households with cable television or Internet access; the number of cable news subscribers; or the distance between the party medians in Common Space DW-NOMINATE.¹⁰⁰

¹⁰⁰Poole and Rosenthal 1997; Poole and Rosenthal 2007.

Another potential concern is that opposition approval is measured at the monthly rather than weekly level. However, the effect of lagged opposition approval remains negative and statistically significant if the model is instead estimated at the monthly level (results available upon request). An additional potential concern is that the baseline hazard may vary depending on the previous number of scandals. I find that the results are unchanged when I control for the number of past scandals.¹⁰¹ Finally, while one might be concerned about the effects of scandal on subsequent opposition approval, the data provide little evidence of endogeneity.¹⁰²

The models in the third and fourth columns test H2, which predicts that increased news pressure will decrease the likelihood of a new media scandal. Due to the limitations of instrumental variables models for binary outcome measures discussed above, I first present a fixed effects OLS model with the endogenous news pressure variable in the third column before reporting a linear IV model with fixed effects, which instruments for news pressure using an indicator for exogenous news events, in the fourth column (both are estimated with standard errors that are robust to arbitrary heteroscedasticity and autocorrelation). The IV model performs well, passing numerous weak instrument diagnostics (results available upon request) including the first-stage F threshold of 10 recommended by Staiger and Stock.¹⁰³ Moreover, the OLS and IV results are quite different, allowing us to reject the null of exogeneity ($p < .01$).¹⁰⁴ Specifically, while the OLS estimate of the effect of news pressure on scandal onset is positive and significant ($p < .10$), the estimated effect in the IV model is negative and significant ($p < .05$) as predicted by H2. In substantive terms, news pressure reduces the likelihood that a new scandal once we account for the endogeneity between

¹⁰¹Beck, Katz, and Tucker 1998, p. 1272. Because I treat George H.W. Bush's administration as a continuation of Reagan's (he suffered three scandals based on actions taken by the Reagan administration during his first year in office), I do not reset the event counter in 1989.

¹⁰²When I regress opposition approval on its lagged value, the years in office polynomials, and presidential fixed effects, I cannot reject the null hypothesis that lagged scandal onset has no effect on opposition approval for scandal lags of one, two, three, or four weeks (standard errors clustered by president; results available upon request). While previous studies of the effect of scandal on approval have reached conflicting conclusions, the most comprehensive study estimates a model of approval using each event in their data as a separate variable (Newman and Forchimes 2010). Only two—Billy Carter and Iran-Contra—are negative and significant.

¹⁰³Staiger and Stock 1997. The first-stage results for the IV models in Tables 1 and 2 are provided in Online Appendix E.

¹⁰⁴Though this test cannot prove that an instrument is truly exogenous, it allows us to test for equality of the estimated coefficients between models.

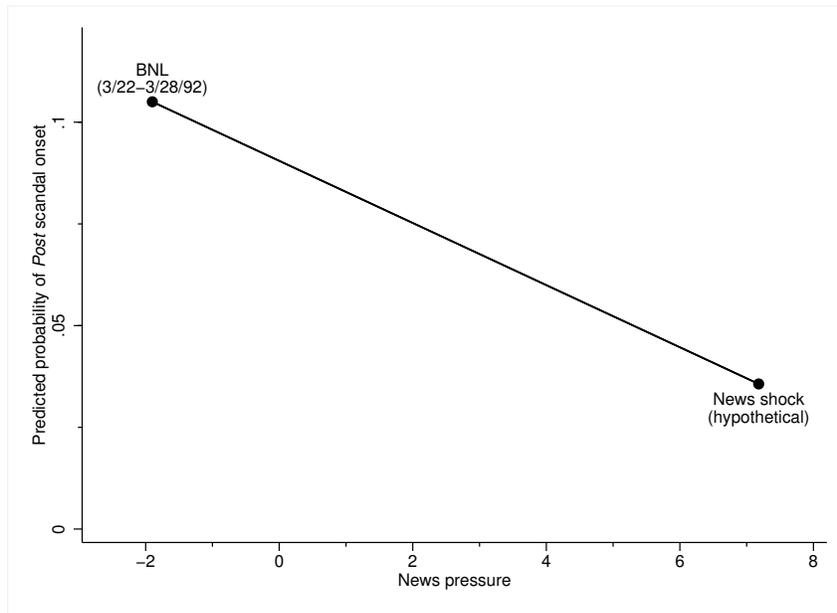
news pressure and scandal onset. These results are robust to instrumenting for news pressure in the previous week using a lagged exogenous news event indicator or including the exogenous news events measure directly in a reduced form model, which directly measures the effect of these events on the probability of scandal (both results available upon request).

To illustrate the substantive importance of this effect, I again provide a simulation of an unexpected shock to the treatment variable of interest. In this case, I consider a counterfactual scenario in the week in which the controversy over the Reagan and Bush administration's handling of government-subsidized loans to Iraq by the Atlanta branch of Banca Nazionale del Lavoro (BNL) was first recognized as a scandal on the front page of the *Post* (March 22–28, 1992). It was a slow news week with news pressure at approximately the 10th percentile of the distribution. What would happen to the predicted probability of scandal in that week if a breaking news event occurred? Specifically, I consider a scenario in which an unexpected event increased news pressure to the value observed after Princess Diana's death in 1997 (7.2 minutes above the yearly mean for lead evening news segments). Under this scenario, which is plotted in Figure 2, the predicted probability of scandal onset with other variables at their observed values declines by 66%, dropping from .105 in the week in question to a counterfactual value of .036.

In addition, the polynomials for time in office and time since last scandal, which are included to account for potential duration dependence or other temporal patterns in the data, have substantively and statistically significant effects. Likelihood ratio tests of nested models reject the null hypothesis that both the years in office and years between scandal polynomials are jointly zero ($p < .01$ in both cases), suggesting that both sets of terms should be included. To illustrate these effects, I follow the recommendation of Carter and Signorino and plot the estimated probabilities of scandal over time for a hypothetical president with representative covariate values in Figure 3.¹⁰⁵ Figure 3(a) plots the risk of scandal during a president's time in office. The *Post* data show an initially high risk of scandal as presidents try to find their footing and get their initial nominees confirmed followed by a decline in scandal risk through their second year. The likelihood of a scandal then increases

¹⁰⁵Carter and Signorino 2010.

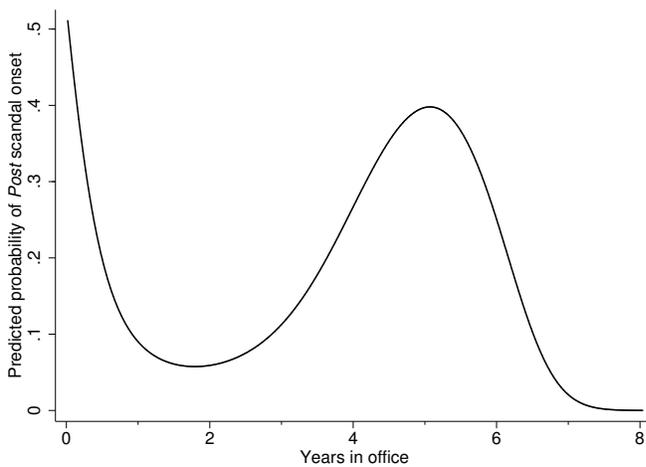
Figure 2: Predicted effect of news shock on scandal onset: Banca Nazionale del Lavoro



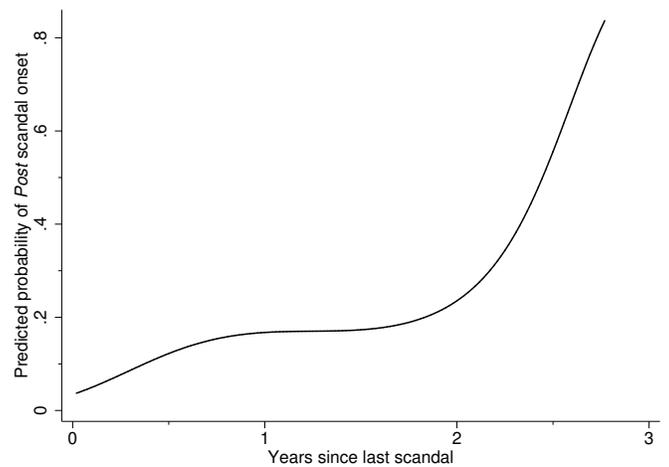
Predicted values from the instrumental variables linear probability model in Table 1 of the effect of a shock to news pressure with other variables held at their actual values for March 22–28, 1992.

Figure 3: Estimated duration dependence

(a) Time in office



(b) Time between scandals



Predicted probabilities from the conditional logit model in Table 1 with the presidential fixed effect set to zero. Continuous variables were set to their means; binary indicators and measures of elapsed time were set to their medians (polynomials were set accordingly).

again to a peak around their fifth year in office (for those who are re-elected) before declining by the end of their second term. By contrast, the results in Figure 3(b) show that the probability of scandal grows slowly as time since the last scandal increases for approximately two years before rising dramatically near the maximum observed value of almost three years.

Besides the findings discussed above, other covariates of interest show surprisingly weak patterns of support, particularly in the linear probability models. For instance, divided government has a positive and significant effect in the conditional logit model but not the OLS model. These inconsistent findings suggest that its association with scandal (as opposed to precursors like investigations and allegations) may have been overstated in previous research. Similarly, the indicator for foreign wars, the time trend (which is highly correlated with legislative polarization and cable news penetration), and House days in session all fail to consistently achieve statistical significance. The fixed effects do not have statistically significant effects in the OLS and IV models and are not estimated in the conditional logit model so they are omitted from Table 1 for space reasons (but are available upon request).

Finally, the results supporting both H1 and H2 in Table 1 are robust to using an alternate measure of scandal onset. In particular, one might be concerned about focusing on the *recognition* of a scandal in news coverage as the measure of onset. Online Appendix F therefore presents results for an alternative media scandal onset measure based on scandal-like events listed in chronologies that were widely covered on the front page of the *New York Times*. While the measure necessarily differs somewhat from the one based on the *Post* due to its focus on the occurrence of discrete events rather than recognized scandals, the results for opposition approval and news pressure are completely consistent with those in Table 1 (i.e., both coefficients are negative and statistically significant) despite using a different media source and coding procedure.

Scandal intensity

The previous analysis considers scandal as a binary state. This approach does not allow for distinctions between major or minor scandals, nor does it allow for flurries of scandals developing within

a given time period. Thus, building on the approach developed above, I use the volume of scandal news coverage as a proxy for the magnitude or intensity of media scandal—specifically, the total number of front-page *Post* stories that describe a controversy involving the president or executive branch as a scandal by week.¹⁰⁶

As before, I estimate the effect of news pressure on media scandal using exogenous news events as an instrument. In this case, however, the dependent variable is scandal intensity, an overdispersed count variable with significant autocorrelation.¹⁰⁷ Given the limitations of current IV event count models (which cannot simultaneously account for autocorrelation and overdispersion) and concerns about the robustness of GLM estimators to misspecification,¹⁰⁸ I instead use a linear IV model with standard errors that are robust to arbitrary heteroscedasticity and autocorrelation (HAC). The model specification is identical to equations 1 and 3 above (I retain polynomials for time since the last scandal to account for dynamics in coverage between scandals).

The OLS and IV estimates for weekly front-page coverage in the *Post* are reported in Table 2. The estimated OLS coefficient for news pressure is positive and significant ($p < .10$). However, when endogeneity has been purged in the IV model, which again passes a variety of weak instrument diagnostics, the estimated effect of news pressure on scandal intensity is negative and statistically significant ($p < .05$). Consistent with H2, I find that increased news pressure reduces the intensity of media coverage of presidential and executive branch scandal.

Figure 4 illustrates the magnitude of the estimated effect using a counterfactual scenario for March 18–24, 2007, the peak of the U.S. attorneys scandal. News pressure in that week was slightly above average for the year. In this scenario, I again leave all other variables at their observed values and estimate the effect of an exogenous news shock comparable to the one experienced from the Israel-Lebanon war during the week of July 16–22, 2006 (4.8 minutes above the yearly mean for the

¹⁰⁶As with scandal onset, it is not possible to account for evidence of impropriety in analyzing this dependent variable. Even if reliable evidentiary data were available in longitudinal form (which they are not), including a measure of *revealed* evidence of misbehavior would induce post-treatment bias because the process that generates such revelations is affected by the contextual factors I analyze (King and Zeng 2006).

¹⁰⁷The mean number of front page scandal articles in the *Post* in a given week is 0.48 with a standard deviation of 1.26. A regression of weekly *Post* scandal articles on their lagged value estimates that the coefficient on lagged articles is 0.60 (s.e.=0.02; results available upon request).

¹⁰⁸Angrist and Pischke 2009, pp. 197–198.

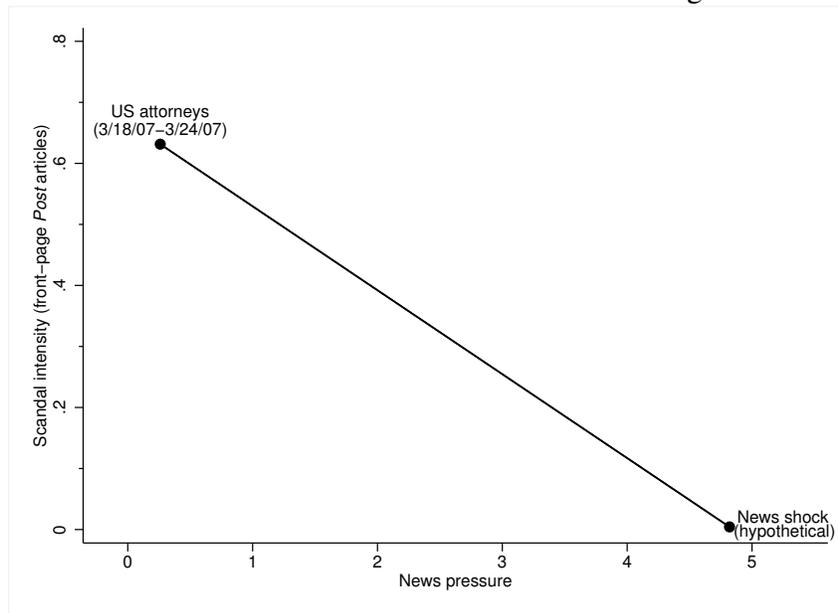
Table 2: News pressure models of *Washington Post* scandal intensity 1977–2008 (weekly data)

	OLS	IV reg.
News pressure	0.03* (0.02)	-0.14** (0.07)
Opposition approval (lag)	0.99*** (0.32)	1.13*** (0.37)
Divided government	-0.18** (0.09)	-0.13 (0.10)
War	-0.51*** (0.09)	-0.19 (0.16)
Years after 1976	0.10 (0.16)	0.08 (0.17)
Years in office	-0.76*** (0.26)	-0.73*** (0.26)
Years in office ²	0.29*** (0.08)	0.29*** (0.08)
Years in office ³ /10	-0.25*** (0.07)	-0.25*** (0.07)
Years between scandals	0.17 (0.58)	-0.17 (0.58)
Years between scandals ²	-0.24 (0.51)	0.14 (0.51)
Years between scandals ³ /10	0.72 (1.26)	-0.38 (1.27)
House days in session	0.05 (0.13)	0.04 (0.13)
Hurricane peak	0.10 (0.12)	0.20 (0.14)
Presidential fixed effects	Yes	Yes
Standard errors	HAC	HAC
Instrument for news pressure		Exogenous news events
First-stage F		14.76
N	1670	1670

* $p < .10$; ** $p < .05$; *** $p < .01$. All results include standard errors that are robust to arbitrary heteroscedasticity and autocorrelation (HAC) with a bandwidth of 4 weeks. IV regression results estimated using two-stage least squares.

length of initial evening news segments). As news pressure increases from its observed value to the counterfactual level, the predicted number of front-page *Washington Post* scandal stories decreases from 0.67 to approximately zero (0.004). Given that *Post* scandal coverage is likely to be highly correlated with other elite media sources, this finding suggests that news pressure has a significant impact on presidential scandal coverage in the news media.

Figure 4: Predicted effect of news shock on scandal coverage: U.S. attorneys



Predicted values from the instrumental variables linear probability model in Table 2 of the effect of a shock to news pressure with other variables held at their actual values for July 16–22, 2006.

It is also instructive to consider the other coefficients from Table 2 and contrast them with the results in Table 1, which considered predictors of scandal onset rather than intensity. First, opposition approval is *positively* associated with scandal intensity, which reflects the confound between approval and re-election discussed above (presidents with higher approval are more likely to serve a second term, which is when the most significant scandals tend to occur). Second, the coefficients for divided government, war, and years after 1976 are not consistently statistically significant, corroborating the inconsistent results in Table 1. Finally, the polynomials for years in office, which are highly significant, produce similar dynamics to Figure 3(a)—an initial decline in expected coverage

followed by a peak and decline in the second term (available upon request).¹⁰⁹

Conclusion

Contrary to the prevailing interpretation of scandals as resulting from evidence of misconduct, I show that the occurrence of presidential media scandals is also significantly influenced by the political and news context. In particular, when the president is popular with opposition identifiers, scandals are unlikely, but the likelihood of scandal increases as the opposition base becomes more hostile to the administration. This paper also presents the first systematic argument for the claim that media scandals are less likely to occur when other events are in the news. I develop a theory in which news pressure increases the opportunity costs of scandal coverage and test my predictions using coverage of exogenous news events as an instrument for news pressure. My analyses indicate that congestion of the news agenda has a strongly negative influence on the onset of scandal and the extent of scandal coverage. Together, these findings help illuminate a phenomenon that plays a crucial role in contemporary American politics.

Future research should consider the extent to which these findings apply to other officeholders in the United States. The theory presented above seems to translate most directly to governors. As with presidents, state opposition party members have an incentive to promote scandal allegations against governors to damage his or her party brand name in the state, but demand for such allegations from opposition party identifiers will vary over time. Governors are also the subject of routinized news coverage from state media, which may pursue scandal coverage during slow news periods but focus on more compelling stories during periods of high news congestion in a similar fashion to the national press.¹¹⁰ By contrast, the demand for information about scandals involving individual members of Congress and state legislators (and the potential damage to the party brand that might result) is seemingly weaker than for governors and presidents regardless of the political or media

¹⁰⁹The presidential fixed effects were again not statistically significant (details available upon request).

¹¹⁰A similar argument might apply to Congressional leaders, though they are typically less well-known at the national level than governors are in their states.

context. As a result, the scandals that lower-level officials face may be less influenced by contextual factors, though Gordon finds suggestive evidence to the contrary.¹¹¹

The results presented above also have potentially important implications for the literature on scandal in comparative politics, including both presidential and parliamentary systems. For instance, the process by which events like scandals affect the stability of parliamentary coalitions is the subject of an extensive literature.¹¹² In particular, Lupia and Strøm argues that “events such as wars, scandals, and economic shocks are not inherently critical” but instead “become critical through their effects on parliamentary bargaining.”¹¹³ In this sense, then, the vulnerability of a coalition to scandal might depend on context in a similar manner to the theory I propose.¹¹⁴

Finally, my findings could be instructive to future research on the study of the presidency and the influence of presidential approval on political events. First, just as the chief executive’s opportunities for leadership are shaped by the circumstances he faces in office,¹¹⁵ these results show how context affects the challenges that presidents face (including scandal). Second, my analysis suggests the potential value of disaggregating approval to focus on partisan identifiers, who may have a disproportionate influence on elite co-partisans.

Of course, this article has limitations that should be addressed in future scholarship. First, I rely on scandal coverage from *Washington Post*. Though the *Post* plays a key role in setting the news agenda for the national media’s coverage of Washington politics, it would be desirable to consider a wider variety of outlets in future research. The present study is also limited by the small number of presidents in the contemporary era. My results are robust to presidential fixed effects, but it is difficult to reach strong conclusions about administration-level differences with so few presidents in the data. Future research should consider the predictors of scandal over a longer period (including extending the data to cover the Obama administration). Finally, scholars should

¹¹¹Gordon 2010.

¹¹²See, e.g., Browne, Frensdreis, and Gleiber 1986; Strøm et al. 1988; King et al. 1990.

¹¹³Lupia and Strøm 1995, pp. 651–652.

¹¹⁴Similarly, Dewan and Myatt propose a model in which policy activism by cabinet ministers in parliamentary systems increases their vulnerability to scandal allegations from opposing interests (Dewan and Myatt 2007; see also Dewan and Myatt 2010).

¹¹⁵Edwards 2009.

examine how the president's response to an allegation may affect the likelihood of scandal¹¹⁶—a question I do not address here due to the small number of media scandals in my data, the different unit of analysis (time intervals rather than allegations), and the inferential challenges posed by post-treatment bias¹¹⁷ and endogeneity in duration models.¹¹⁸

Nonetheless, these results have important implications for processes of democratic accountability. Normatively, we would like to hold elected officials accountable for misconduct based on evidence alone, but my results suggest that the likelihood of successful accusations of wrongdoing against presidents and their administrations is deeply shaped by the political and news context. Such an effect can have perverse consequences. When the environment is relatively unfavorable for scandal, it may weaken the incentives for ethical behavior by the president and his or her administration. By contrast, scandals will sometimes occur even when the evidence of misbehavior is weak if the environment is more favorable for scandal, which could potentially further undermine the credibility of ethical charges against the executive branch and increase cynicism about politics.

Finally, these findings raise questions about the broader influence of context on the creation and interpretation of political events in the media. Just as a flimsy allegation can create a scandal in certain circumstances, other triggering events may be more likely to be interpreted by journalists and other elites as gaffes or policy failures when the context is unfavorable for the president (and conversely for positive events). In this way, scandal may serve as a window into the highly contingent process by which political events are created and interpreted in a democratic society.

¹¹⁶Basinger and Rottinghaus 2012.

¹¹⁷King and Zeng 2006.

¹¹⁸Boehmke, Morey, and Shannon 2006.

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Appendix A: List of media scandals

Scandal	Administration	Onset date
GSA corruption	Carter	July 27, 1978
Billy Carter	Carter	September 10, 1980
Hugel finances	Reagan	July 24, 1981
EPA document controversy	Reagan	December 2, 1983
Donovan charges	Reagan	October 3, 1984
DOD procurement	Reagan	June 3, 1985
Iran-Contra	Reagan	November 27, 1986
Wedtech contracts	Reagan	July 10, 1987
S&L failures/bailout	G.H.W. Bush	May 15, 1989
HUD corruption	G.H.W. Bush	July 8, 1989
FDA generic drugs	G.H.W. Bush	September 1, 1989
Banca Nazionale del Lavoro	G.H.W. Bush	March 22, 1992
Tailhook controversy	G.H.W. Bush	June 27, 1992
Whitewater	Clinton	July 1, 1994
Travel Office firings	Clinton	January 5, 1996
Dick Morris	Clinton	August 30, 1996
Filegate	Clinton	October 26, 1996
Foreign contributions	Clinton	December 21, 1996
1996 fundraising	Clinton	February 13, 1997
Military sexual harassment	Clinton	May 31, 1997
Links to Carey/Teamsters	Clinton	October 6, 1997
Lewinsky affair	Clinton	January 24, 1998
China spying/Los Alamos	Clinton	March 14, 1999
Valerie Plame	G.W. Bush	October 5, 2003
Abu Ghraib	G.W. Bush	May 6, 2004
Prisoner treatment	G.W. Bush	January 7, 2005
Safavian convicted	G.W. Bush	June 21, 2006
US attorneys	G.W. Bush	March 21, 2007

Coding procedure

- The *Post* was searched in Lexis-Nexis Academic for “[president name]” OR “president” OR “white house” in the fields for headline, lead paragraphs, or terms.
- The search results were then narrowed to news articles that included the word “scandal” in the A section (previously called “First Section”). Featured news columnists who write in an opinionated voice (such as Mary McGrory or Dana Milbank) were excluded.
- If a specific controversy was referred to as a “scandal” in the reporter’s voice or the headline, the date and scandal were recorded.
- If more than one controversy was described as a scandal in the same article, then a separate entry was created for each scandal reference.
- References to “alleged” scandals were omitted, as were vague descriptions of people or organizations as “scandal-ridden” or “scandal-plagued.”
- Controversies about actions taken by the executive branch under previous administrations were excluded (except for those of President George H.W. Bush, who was held responsible for events that took place when he was Ronald Reagan’s Vice President).
- Scandals that did not directly involve the executive branch such as the collapse of Enron or bond trading scandals on Wall Street were also omitted. However, controversies over past actions taken by individuals in the executive branch such as Whitewater were included if those controversies took place while the administration held office.
- Articles were coded as focusing on a given scandal if the article devoted at least one of the first three paragraphs to the controversy.¹

Dependent variables

- *Scandal onset*: The calendar week in which a controversy was first described as a “scandal” in the *Post* in a front-page article meeting the above criteria.
- *Scandal intensity*: The total number of articles describing a controversy as a “scandal” in the *Post* in a given calendar week.

¹The initial paragraphs of a news article describe the focus of a story or summarize its most important elements in the inverted pyramid structure typically used in American print journalism.

Appendix B: Exogenous news events

News event	Administration	Week coded
Elvis Presley's death	Carter	August 14–20, 1977
Jonestown suicides	Carter	November 19–25, 1978
American Airlines Flight 191 crash	Carter	May 27–June 2, 1979
John Lennon's murder	Carter	December 7–13, 1980
Pan Am Flight 759 crash	Reagan	July 11–17, 1982
McDonald's shootings (San Ysidro, CA)	Reagan	July 15–21, 1984
Post office shootings (Edmund, OK)	Reagan	August 17–23, 1986
Northwest Airlines Flight 255 crash	Reagan	August 16–22, 1987
Hurricane Hugo	G.H.W. Bush	September 17–23, 1989
Loma Prieta earthquake	G.H.W. Bush	October 15–21, 1989
Luby's Cafeteria shootings (Killeen, TX)	G.H.W. Bush	October 13–19, 1991
Hurricane Andrew	G.H.W. Bush	August 23–29, 1992
Northridge earthquake	Clinton	January 16–22, 1994
TWA Flight 800 crash	Clinton	July 14–20, 1996
Heaven's Gate suicides	Clinton	March 23–29, 1997
Princess Diana dies	Clinton	August 31–September 6, 1997
Columbine shootings	Clinton	April 18–24, 1999
John F. Kennedy Jr. crash	Clinton	July 18–24, 1999
American Airlines Flight 587 crash	G.W. Bush	November 11–17, 2001
Hurricane Charley	G.W. Bush	August 8–14, 2004
Hurricane Frances	G.W. Bush	September 5–11, 2004
Hurricane Ivan	G.W. Bush	September 12–18, 2004
Hurricane Jeanne	G.W. Bush	September 26–October 2, 2004
Hurricane Rita	G.W. Bush	September 18–24, 2005
Hurricane Charley	G.W. Bush	October 23–29, 2005
Virginia Tech shootings	G.W. Bush	April 15–21, 2007
Hurricane Ike	G.W. Bush	September 7–13, 2008

This list includes the five worst mass shootings as measured by number of deaths;¹ the nine worst hurricanes in U.S. history by property damage;² the four most iconic celebrity deaths of unnatural causes during the 1977–2008 period;³ the two worst earthquakes by property damage;⁴ the two worst mass suicides;⁵ and the five worst plane crashes in the U.S. by number of fatalities.⁶

¹Violence Policy Center 2007.

²Insurance Information Institute 2011b. I use the top ten worst hurricanes but exclude Hurricane Katrina, which damaged George W. Bush politically.

³CBSNews.com 2009.

⁴Insurance Information Institute 2011a. The next most severe earthquake created vastly less damage.

⁵Agence France Presse 2000. Only three of the ten worst mass suicides involved Americans. I include the Jonestown massacre even though it took place outside the geographic U.S. because the victims were American. However, I exclude the 1993 Branch Davidian fire because the Clinton administration was accused of misconduct after the incident.

⁶Smith 2009.