

RESEARCH BRIEF

Political Scandal: A Theory

Based on BFI Working Paper No. 2020-17, “[Political Scandal: A Theory](#),” by Wioletta Dziuda, assistant professor, UChicago’s Harris School of Public Policy, and William G. Howell, Sydney Stein Professor in American Politics, UChicago’s Harris School of Public Policy

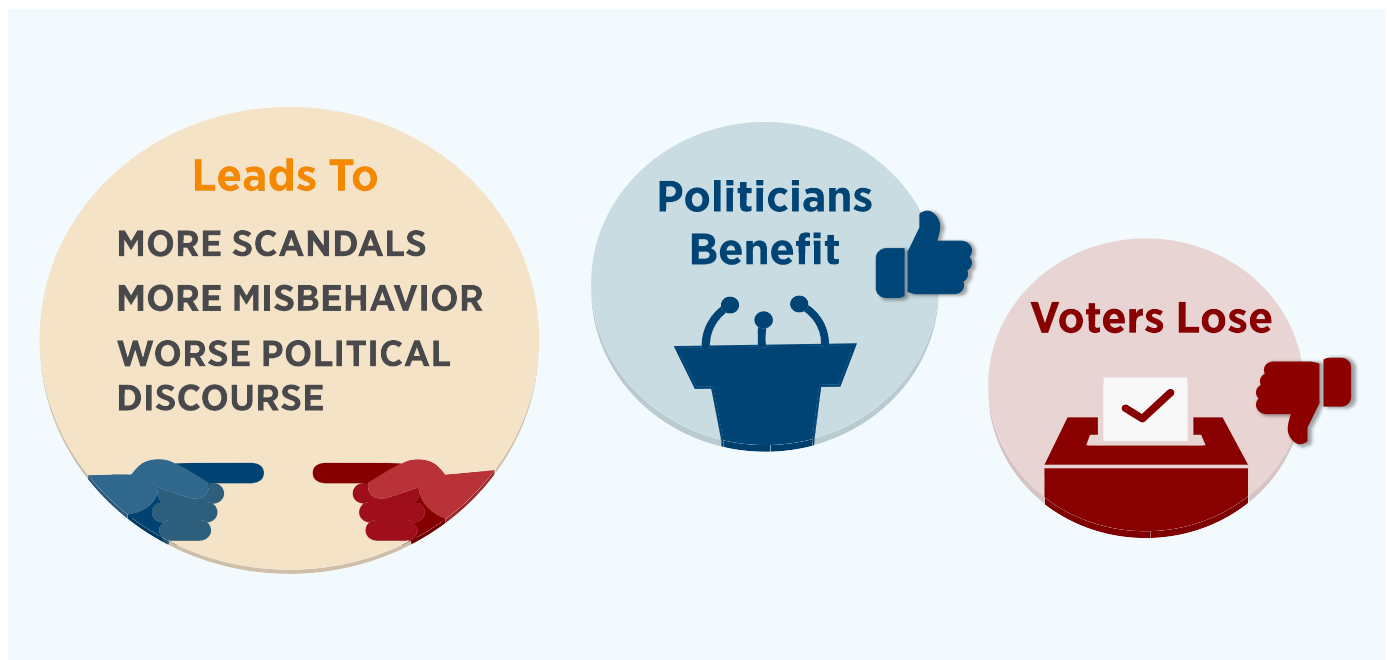
KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ✓ Political polarization is a key factor shaping the prevalence and informative value of scandals
- ✓ Polarization accelerates the production of scandal: increases revelation of misconduct as well as fake accusations
- ✓ In polarized times, scandals ruin reputation of the parties, but perhaps surprisingly, the implicated politician’s reputation suffers little if at all
- ✓ Lower informational value of scandals during polarized times creates fertile conditions for politicians’ misbehavior

Imagine a scenario where Politician A is reported to have said something politically damaging in a closed-door meeting. However, the news of this indiscretion is reported by members of the opposition party, with the members of Politician A’s party vehemently denying the accusation. Who would you believe? Would you lose faith in the politician, or would you blame extreme polarization for the political theater that you just witnessed?

Now imagine a scenario where Politician B is caught red-handed engaging in inappropriate behavior, and there is evidence for all to see or hear. On its own, though, this behavior is not enough to warrant condemnation by Politician B’s party, especially since it only happened once. However, some in the opposition party insinuate that this was not a singular event and, rather, is suggestive of Politician B’s proclivities. As a voter, you might assume that politicians have inside information about Politician B’s behavior and there might be something to the charges.

These questions are more than just political parlor games, but lie at the heart of new research from Wioletta Dziuda and William G. Howell of UChicago’s Harris School of Public Policy. In “Political



Scandal: A Theory,” Dziuda and Howell show that the answers are shaped in large part by the level of political polarization present in a political system. Their work reveals new insights into how polarization drives political scandal, encourages misbehavior among politicians, and ultimately decreases the value of political discourse, all to the detriment of voters.

More polarization = more scandals

US political history is rife with scandal. Whether at the federal, state, or local level, readers can doubtless recall numerous incidents of politicians behaving badly. However, scandal for political scientists is not defined as mere misbehavior, but rather the accusation of misbehavior, and such accusations are often partisan. That key distinction is at the heart of Dziuda and Howell’s analysis. They ask what political calculus leads to scandals, and how this calculus affects the extent to which scandals provide useful information to the voters about actual misbehavior.

To examine these political forces, the authors devised a model where scandals are generated within a political framework involving two parties and one elected official (call her Sen. Smith) who represents one of the parties. The parties have information of Sen. Smith’s conduct or character, which is of interest to the voter. If Sen. Smith has

engaged in misconduct or is in some other way unsuited for office, each party can come forward with this information or deny it. Further mirroring real life, either party in the model may also engage in “fake news” tactics and throw baseless accusations. If the opposing party decides to accuse Sen. Smith and her party supports her, then voters must decide whether the resulting scandal has merit and vote whether to remove Sen. Smith from office.

A key characteristic of this dynamic is each political parties’ cost/benefit analysis of the party’s reputation resulting from the scandal, irrespective of the accusation’s merits. Each party weighs the benefits from how the accusations affect Sen. Smith’s political prospects with their own reputation for straight talk. When will the party of Sen. Smith defend her against true or baseless accusations? When will the opposing party cast accusations knowing that the affiliated party will defend her independent of the merit? The answer is heavily influenced by the degree of political polarization. On that note, the model reveals three important insights:

- Polarization breeds dishonesty among political parties. The greater the ideological disagreement between the two parties, the more the aligned party wants to shelter her politician from a scandal and the more

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the opposing party wants to convince the voters that they should call for the politician's dismissal. Following these incentives, the aligned party will suppress information about misconduct and the opposing party will make false accusations. In such a scenario, public discourse is diminished and voters are the losers. Scandal production is only weakly related to the underlying misconduct, leaving the voters little choice but to ignore them when evaluating the politician.

- In polarized times, the implicated politician suffers little or not at all from a partisan scandal. In particular, a politician whom voters view in unfavorable light to begin with may see its support raise after a scandal, if the opposition's accusations are vehemently denied by her own party.
- Such partisan scandals, whereby one party casts accusations and the other denies, have negative consequences for the parties, as their disagreement makes voters conclude that parties are not driven by their desire to weed out undesirable behavior but by their narrow political interests.
- The production of scandals—true or not—may influence the rate of actual misbehavior. Sen. Smith, knowing full well that her party will support her no matter what she does, and that the opposing party will say anything to hurt her election status, and finally that voters will be unable to determine the truth, is properly incented to engage in whatever behavior accrues to her benefit.

Conclusion

While the private actions of politicians may cause voters to scratch their heads in wonder, the transformation of misbehavior into public scandal should not surprise them, as this process is deeply political. In other words, bad behavior is not a scandal on its own, but only after it is exposed, and that exposition is always a choice weighed against the political costs and benefits of respective political parties.

By developing a model that incorporates political polarization into the process of political scandal-making, Dziuda and Howell cast new light on why political parties may choose to expose a member of the opposition party or, on the other hand, stick with a member of its own party that has clearly engaged in questionable activity. Needless to say, this complicates voters' ability to determine the truth, especially those with a strong affinity for a particular party. The dissemination of "fake news" along party lines is another manifestation of the powerful effect of polarization, further clouding voters' decision-making.

One sobering finding of this work with powerful implications for contemporary US politics suggests that political polarization accelerates the production of political scandals. Also, because these scandals are politically motivated, voters hear mixed messages and ultimately learn little about the true nature of politicians. Scandals are reduced to "he said, she said" accusations and counter-assertions. Further, this dynamic incentivizes bad behavior among politicians because, in effect, they will suffer no real consequences—their party always has their backs.

That said, the presence of more scandals does not necessarily mean there is more bad behavior. The reason is emphasized by the key insight of the paper, which bears stressing: scandals arise from political polarization. The greater the divide between two parties, the greater the incentive to expose bad behavior by members of the opposing party, or to even suggest the idea of misbehavior, even if it is based on flimsy evidence.

The implication of this work on future research about political scandals suggests that a mere accounting of political scandals over time and place is not an accurate measurement of misbehavior. Rather, attention must be paid to the

relationships between the implicated politicians and their political parties, and especially on the level of polarization among those parties. This lesson also applies to those interested in trying to reduce political misbehavior: scandals on their own are a bad proxy for misbehavior and are often more reflective of political polarization than misconduct.

CLOSING TAKEAWAY

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