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NOTE



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ABSTRACT


Research finds citizens are less likely to penalize politicians implicated in sex scandals compared to corruption. Still, observational data reveals that some politicians have better luck surviving sex scandals than others. Do voters punish politicians for sex scandals? We argue yes – some do. Whereas liberals are inclined to view sex scandals as personal matters – unrelated to a politician’s job performance – conservatives are more likely to view sex scandals as moral outrages that disregard traditional values and threaten the social order. Conservatives are thus less forgiving of sex scandals than liberals, especially when women politicians are implicated. Using evidence from a survey experiment in the US designed to isolate the effect of scandal type (corruption vs. sex) and candidate sex, we investigate heterogeneous effects by political ideology. We find that liberals tend to be forgiving of sex scandals, but not corruption. Conservatives, by contrast, punish men’s sex scandals on par with men’s involvement in corruption. And, conservatives assign women a penalty bonus for either type of scandal. That is, they are significantly more likely than liberals to punish women for involvement in either type of scandal – sex or corruption.

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Introduction

Research shows women are less likely to be involved in corruption (Bauhr, Charron, and Wängnerud 2019; Esarey and Schwindt-Bayer 2018; Watson and Moreland 2014), owing to higher levels of risk aversion (Esarey and Schwindt-Bayer 2019) and exclusion from informal networks that facilitate corruption (Bjarnegård 2013). Voters are also less likely to suspect women of corruption (Barnes and Beaulieu 2014; Cossette and Craig 2019). When women deviate from these expectations, some find women are punished more than men – though here, the research is mixed. Whereas research on Latin America demonstrates women presidents face higher ethical standards, and their approval ratings suffer more than men implicated in scandals

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(Carlin, Carreras, and Love 2019; Reyes-Housholder 2019), experimental research in the United Kingdom finds that voters are not more likely to punish women than men for corruption (Eggers, Vivyan, and Wagner 2018).

Research on gender and scandals has largely focused on political corruption (Alexander and Bågenholm 2018; Stensöta, Wängnerud, and Svensson 2015), but scandals involving sexual transgressions are widespread, attracting voters' and the media's attention alike. The research that does exist indicates that voters, on average, care less about moral transgressions than corruption and are thus less likely to punish politicians for involvement in sex scandals (Barnes, Beaulieu, and Saxton 2020; Doherty, Dowling, and Miller 2011). Still, consistent with research showing women and men in society are held to different standards (Bauer 2020; Krupnikov and Bauer 2014), particularly regarding sexual promiscuity (Crawford and Popp 2003), voters' ideological predispositions affect their willingness to punish men and women politicians differently for sex scandals (Barnes, Beaulieu, and Saxton 2020). Namely, Barnes, Beaulieu, and Saxton (2020) find hostile sexists—individuals harboring explicitly antagonistic attitudes toward women (Glick and Fiske 1996; Casese and Holman 2018)—are more likely than non-sexists to punish women (not men) for sex scandals. As with this system-justifying ideology (i.e. sexism), we contend that political ideology should also shape citizens' responses to sex scandals. Political conservatism, particularly its social dimension (as opposed to economic) correlates with ideas about regulating sexuality (Graham, Haidt, and Nosek 2009), with conservatives being more likely than liberals to moralize and condemn not only threats to sanctity and purity, but also authority and the status quo (Haidt and Hersh 2001).

We investigate how individuals' political ideology, as well as politicians' sex, affect voters' responses to sex and corruption scandals. We argue although some voters are likely to see sex scandals as less egregious than corruption, others are equally likely to penalize incumbents at the polls for their moral transgressions. Drawing on political psychology research, we argue that conservative voters are less forgiving of sex scandals than liberals, especially when women politicians are implicated.

Using a survey experiment designed to isolate the effect of the scandal type (corruption vs. sex) and politician sex, we investigate heterogeneous treatment effects by political ideology. On average voters are generally less forgiving of corruption, compared to sex scandals. Yet, there are strong heterogeneous effects by political ideology, with conservatives being more likely than liberals to punish politicians – and particularly women – for sex scandals.

Political ideology and reactions to scandal

Voters are less likely to punish politicians for sex scandals than corruption (Doherty, Dowling, and Miller 2011, 2014). This relationship is attenuated for

people with low political knowledge (Funk 1996) and high hostile and benevolent sexism (Barnes, Beaulieu, and Saxton 2020). Further, individuals who oppose abortion and gay marriage respond more negatively to infidelity scandals (Doherty, Dowling, and Miller 2011). We contend that political ideology may also affect voters' reactions to sex scandals.

First, psychology research on political ideology shows that liberals and conservatives rely on different psychological and emotional foundations when making moral judgments (Graham, Haidt, and Nosek 2009; Haidt and Hersh 2001). Whereas conservatives are more likely to moralize and condemn deviant or sexual acts (Haidt and Hersh 2001), liberals likely consider these acts private affairs not subject to moral judgments. Unlike liberals, conservatives have a broader moral foundation that draws on evaluations of loyalty, authority, purity and sanctity. Conversely, liberals only moralize acts that are unfair or that directly harm other people (Graham, Haidt, and Nosek 2009).

The different underpinnings of their moral foundations suggest conservatives may find sex scandals to be more egregious than do liberals. Liberals are more inclined to view a sex scandal as a personal matter, unrelated to a politician's job performance, and therefore withhold punishment at the polls. Conservatives, by contrast, are more likely to view sex scandals as moral outrages that disregard traditional values, threaten the social order, and are worthy of punishment. Thus, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 1: Whereas liberals and conservatives will punish corruption at similar rates, compared to liberals, political conservatives will be more likely to punish a politician who has been implicated in a sex scandal.

Candidate gender and voters' political ideology

Research on the moral foundations of political ideology may also lead to gendered expectations about conservatives' reactions to scandal. Scandals involving women politicians challenge conservatives' moral concerns about purity, traditionalism, order, and the status quo. First, women candidates are typically viewed as political outsiders (Barnes, Beaulieu, and Saxton 2018), breaking with the status quo, and challenging traditional gender norms. They are subject to additional scrutiny to begin with (Bauer 2015). Second, although voters tend to be less punitive of politicians with shared partisan identities (Barnes and Beaulieu 2014), women are stereotyped as more liberal than men (King and Matland 2003). Hence, conservatives may be less willing to give women a pass if they perceive them as more liberal.

Third, women implicated in either corruption or sex scandals violate different sets of traditional gender expectations, which conservatives should find morally problematic. Traditional gender stereotypes, for example, portray women as more honest and moral than men (Funk, Hinojosa, and Piscopo 2019), and as having "a quality of purity that few men possess"

(Glick and Fiske 1996). When women violate gender stereotypes or behave in counter-stereotypic ways, they are seen as unlikable and are punished by out-partisan voters for violating gender norms (Bauer 2017).

Consequently, women implicated in any type of scandal may be subject to especially hostile reactions from conservatives for violating traditional expectations about women's morality and purity (Cassese and Holman 2018; Reyes-Housholder 2019). As liberals are less likely to punish sex scandals in the first place, they should already have a lower propensity to punish women for sex scandals. And, although liberals and conservatives should react similarly to corruption *on average*, conservatives should be more likely than liberals to punish women – who they view as being more liberal and political outsiders– for being implicated in corruption. We posit the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 2a: Political conservatives will be more likely than liberals to punish women for involvement in a sex scandal.

Hypothesis 2b: Political conservatives will be more likely than liberals to punish women for involvement in a corruption scandal.

Evaluating the effects of political ideology on voters' response to scandal

We use an online survey with embedded experimental manipulations that was administered to 1,416 participants in the United States in April 2017, using Amazon.com's Mechanical Turk platform.¹ Participants were randomly assigned to receive two treatments – scandal type and candidate sex. We also included two treatments wherein we did not vary the type of scandal. Participants were randomly assigned to read: "A US Representative is up for reelection and his/her term has been relatively unremarkable except for a corruption/sex scandal."² Participants who did not receive the scandal treatment simply read that the representative is up for reelection.³ Then, everyone is asked, "If this were your representative, how likely would you be to vote for him/her in the next election?"⁴ This design allows us to isolate the effects of scandal type and candidate sex on voters' propensity to punish sex scandals and corruption.

¹Studies using MTurk consistently replicate results from other representative samples (Mullinix et al. 2015).

²We used Qualtrics' "randomizer" function to assign treatments. See Appendix Table B1 for sample characteristics. Table B2 shows a multinomial logit predicting treatment assignment.

³See Appendix Table B3 for the exact wording of each vignette.

⁴We exclude partisan treatments because co-partisans are less likely to suspect (Barnes and Beaulieu 2014) or punish (Anduzia, Gallego, and Muñoz 2013; Cossette and Craig 2019) corruption among co-partisans. Still saying "your representative" might prime readers to think about their own representatives' partisanship. Since this possibility would be applied equally across treatment groups, thinking about "your representative" when you have shared partisanship would bias the results toward the null.

Average treatment effects

First, we investigate average responses across our six experimental groups. Consistent with conventional wisdom, participants are less forgiving of corruption than sex scandals: 93% of respondents reported unwillingness to vote for the incumbent involved in a corruption scandal compared to 84% who said they were unwilling to vote for incumbents involved in a sex scandal (Appendix Table A1). Unlike previous research on executives (Carlin, Carreras, and Love 2019; Reyes-Housholder 2019), we find no differences in average treatment effects between a respondent's willingness to punish men and women legislators for corruption. This is consistent with Eggers, Vivyan, and Wagner's (2018) experiment in the United Kingdom, which also uses hypothetical legislative candidates and scandals. Reyes-Housholder (2019) explains that there may be important differences in gendered expectations between women executives who campaigned on curbing corruption and rank-and-file legislators – which may help us understand why we do not observe a difference in our experiment involving rank-and-file politicians.

Propensity to punish sex scandals: heterogenous treatment effects

To investigate heterogeneous treatment effects by political ideology, we estimated a series of ordered logit models with the participant's willingness to vote for the representative (1 = "Very likely" to 4 = "Very unlikely") as the dependent variable and political ideology as our main independent variable (Appendix Table A2 and A3).⁵ Ideology is measured using respondents' self-placement on a 5-point scale from 1 = liberal to 5 = conservative. To test H1, we include a dummy variable indicating whether the participant received one of the corruption treatments or one of the sex scandal treatments (dummies for the control are excluded as the reference category). To test H2a and H2b, we include a dummy variable for each of our experimental treatments, excluding "male corruption" as the reference category. We interact the treatment dummy variables with ideology to assess whether conservatives are more likely than liberals to punish a sex scandal and if they are more likely to punish women. We control for attitudinal and demographic variables including sex, education, age, income, employment status, and religiosity. We also control for hostile and benevolent sexism to demonstrate that our findings are independent of other system-justifying ideologies, which although often correlate with political conservatism, are conceptually distinct.

We plot the predicted probability of being "very unlikely" to vote for the scandal-hit candidate for each of our treatments across the range of political

⁵See Table A2–A3 for OLS models. We estimate generalized ordered logistic models in Tables A4–A5 to account for the possibility we violate the proportional odds assumption: see Tables A4–5, Figures A1–A2.

ideology in our sample. This shows that on average conservatives are more likely than liberals to punish sex scandals but there are interesting differences in respondents' reactions to male and female candidates. [Figure 1](#) is useful for illustrating conservatives' and liberals' propensity to punish politicians for different types of scandals, nonetheless it does not provide a formal test of our hypotheses.

To explicitly test our hypotheses – that conservatives are more likely than liberals to punish politicians for sex scandal (H1) and are more likely than liberals to punish women for both types of scandals (H2a and H2b) – we need to calculate the difference between liberals' and conservatives' probability of punishment and evaluate whether the differences are statistically significant. [Figure 2](#) thus plots the difference in the probability of saying “very unlikely” between the control groups and each of the treatments for liberals (circles) and conservatives (squares). Put differently, we plot the *effect* of the treatments on respondents' probability of punishing the scandal-hit politician. The top panel plots the average effect of each scandal for liberals and conservatives. The bottom panel plots the effect by candidate sex. Where bars overlap, we are unable to reject the null hypothesis that the point estimates are different at the 95% confidence level.

The top panel in [Figure 2](#) shows strong support for *Hypothesis 1* – on average, conservatives are more likely than liberals to punish sex scandals, but not more likely to punish corruption. Moving from the control group to the sex scandal treatments is associated with a .20 increase in the probability of liberals saying they are “very unlikely” to vote for the representative; the same change is associated with a .39 increase for conservatives, indicating

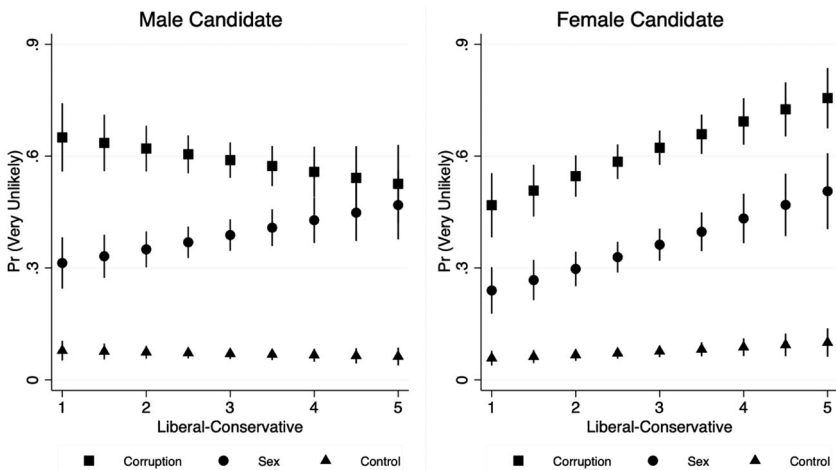


Figure 1. Effect of ideology on voters' willingness to punish scandals. Note: Predicted probabilities calculated using the results in Table A3, Model 2.

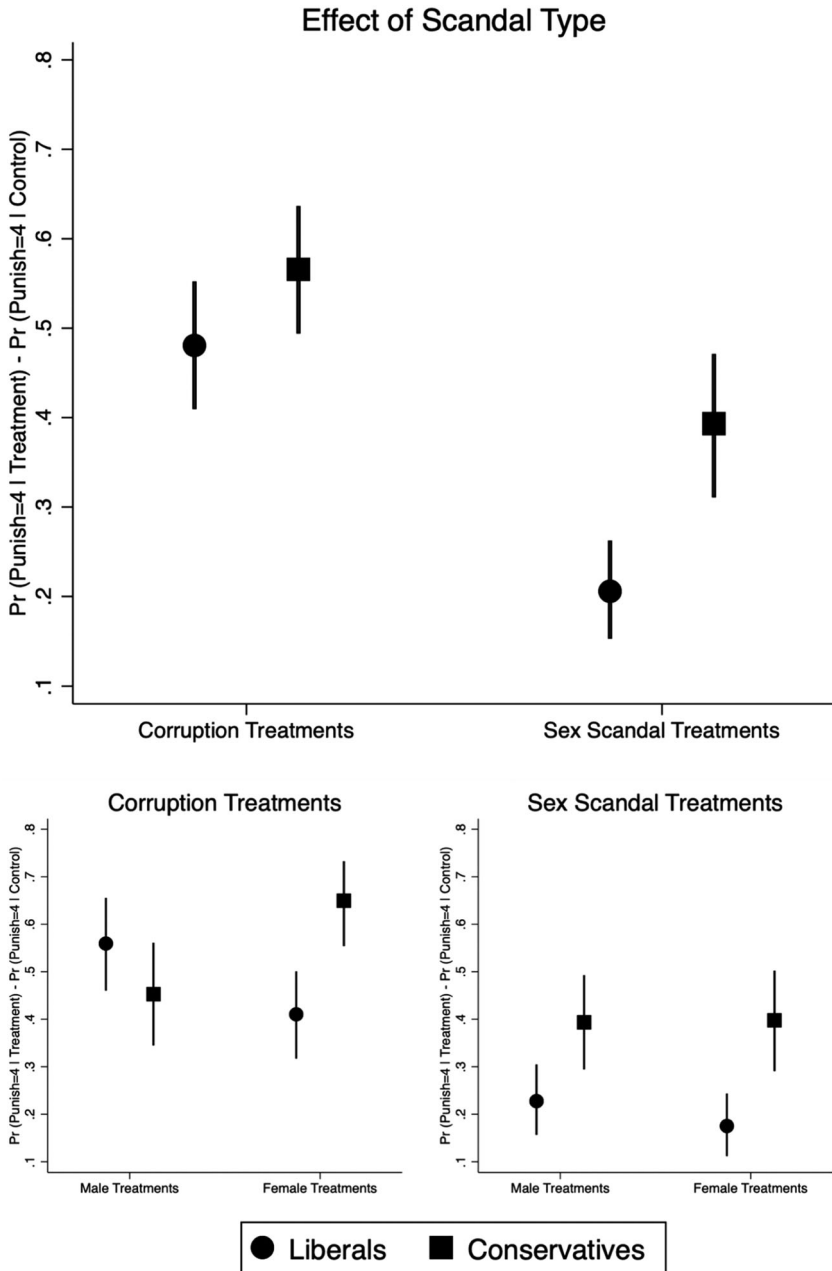


Figure 2. The effect of ideology on voters’ response to scandals.

Note: Point estimates are the difference in the probability of being “very unlikely” to vote for the candidate, between the control and treatments. Bars represent 84% confidence intervals and indicate whether estimates are significantly different at $p < .05$ (Julius 2004).

that conservatives are more likely than liberals to punish sex scandals (difference significant $p < .05$). The effect of the corruption treatment, by contrast, is statistically indistinguishable for liberals and conservatives.

The results in the bottom pane of [Figure 2](#) support both *Hypotheses 2a* and *2b*: when comparing average treatment effects for the female sex scandal group to the female control, conservatives punish women at a rate 127% higher than liberals (increase of .18 for liberals compared to .40 for conservatives). Similarly, conservatives punish women for corruption at a rate nearly 60% higher than liberals (increases of .65 and .41 respectively). The same does not hold for male representatives. Although conservatives appear less tolerant than liberals of men implicated in sex scandals, the predicted differences between control and treatment groups are not significant at $p < .05$ level. Conservatives and liberals likewise punish men for corruption at similar rates as indicated by the statistically indistinguishable treatment effects.

Combined, our results show conservatives are more likely than liberals to punish women for sex scandals, and the same is not true for men. At the same time, conservatives punish women and men involved in sex scandals at the same rate. Our finding in support of *H2a* appears to be driven by the fact that liberals are slightly *less* likely to punish women for sex scandals than men, albeit not at statistically significant rates.

These results suggest that prior research on the moral foundations of political ideology has gendered implications for how voters react to political scandals. Whereas corruption and sex scandals raise different moral concerns for conservatives (order/rule-of-law vs. sanctity/purity), women candidates take an additional hit when implicated in a scandal by activating conservatives' moral concerns about traditionalism and the status quo.

Discussion and conclusion

Although research finds that voters care less about sex scandals than corruption (Doherty, Dowling, and Miller 2011, 2014), only about 40% of officeholders in the U.S. win reelection after a major sex scandal.⁶ This suggests that other factors are important for understanding when politicians are held accountable for scandals (Carlin, Love, and Martínez-Gallardo 2015). We argue that political ideology shapes voters' reactions to political scandals, hypothesizing that political conservatives are less forgiving of sex scandals than liberals – particularly when women are implicated.

Leveraging an original survey experiment in the US, we find conservatives are more likely than liberals to penalize politicians for sex scandals (*H1*). Moreover, when a woman was implicated in *any* type of scandal, conservatives were especially more likely than liberals to punish the representative. Yet,

⁶https://wapo.st/1ixpBGM?tid=ss_tw&utm_term=.4ec6bf726ff9

when a man was implicated in corruption or a sex scandal, conservatives' and liberals' propensities to punish the representative were statistically indistinguishable from one another (Figure 2). In other words, and consistent with *Hypotheses 2a* and *2b*, conservatives are more likely than liberals to punish women for being implicated in either type of scandal.

When thinking about the implications of our findings for politics it may be important to note that far fewer high-profile women than men have faced allegations of sex scandals, although certainly not without exception. In 2010, a high-profile sex scandal involving MP Iris Robinson rocked Northern Ireland. In 2019 a sex scandal involving California Congresswoman Katie Hill resulted in her resignation. Further in 2018, a sex scandal involving Megan Barry, the mayor of Nashville, Tennessee, garnered national media attention. And, when women are involved in sex scandals, it may have different consequences for their lives – beyond differential responses from voters. The anomaly of the scenario in itself may thus have implications for how voters respond. But, if sex scandals were to become more common among women politicians, especially as women continue to make political inroads and challenge the status quo that politics is a “male profession,” they may be viewed as “politics as usual” (as is arguably the case for men) rather than an anomaly to be sanctioned by conservative voters.

Further, it is worth reiterating that conservatives are more likely than liberals to punish women for any scandal. This finding is consistent with previous research showing that voters hold women to a higher standard than men in the face of corruption (Carlin, Carreras, and Love 2019; Reyes-Housholder 2019), and that women are punished for behaving in counter-stereotypic ways (Bauer 2017, 2020). However, our results show that conservatives, and not liberals, hold women to this higher ethical standard. Indeed, although women and men implicated in corruption fared similarly, when comparing conservatives' treatment of women and men, they were much more likely to punish women than men for corruption (Figure 1).

It is noteworthy that our survey was fielded in 2017, after Donald Trump spent months accusing “crooked Hillary” of corruption and threatening to “lock her up” after the election. Although our parsimonious survey experiment cannot inform our understanding of how media treatment of sex scandals influences voters' evaluations, or what images reading about a vague “sex scandal” conjure in voters' minds, in many ways, our result – in conjunction with media coverage of Hillary Clinton at the time of the survey – is consistent with recent research showing that media discourse plays an important role in shaping public attitudes toward women politicians implicated in scandals. Women receive more media attention than men in light of a scandal (Larcinese and Sircar 2017), and for conservative voters, a woman like Hillary Clinton who conservatives already saw as breaking with traditional gender norms and not sharing their own political values, was primed to elicit harsher sanctions from conservative voters for

implication in the same types of scandals as Donald Trump. As Reyes-Housholder (2019, 3) explains, even when women candidates do not proactively draw on gender stereotypes about their perceived integrity and moral leadership, media focus can heighten these expectations. In this way, we must be cognizant of the fact that our experiment was conducted following an election in which media discourse surrounding women politicians and corrupt practices (e.g. Hillary's emails) was salient.

So, if co-partisans are unwilling to punish their own for involvement in corruption (Barnes and Beaulieu 2014), what do these findings mean for politicians involved in sex scandals? Our findings imply that it may be difficult to mobilize conservative voters to turnout when conservative incumbents are involved in sex scandals, and they may even actively punish the incumbent by simply staying home – particularly when the scandal is proximate to elections (Vonnahme 2014). By contrast, when a liberal incumbent is involved in a sex scandal, it may be easier to rally conservative voters to defeat the incumbent by turning out in higher numbers and donating to the conservative challenger's campaign. In a swing district or a particularly tight race, if enough conservative voters abstain from voting for a conservative politician implicated in a moral transgression, then a sex scandal may prove sufficient to end their political career.

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