

Sex and Ideology:

Liberal and Conservative Responses to Scandal

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Abstract

Research finds citizens are far less likely to penalize politicians when they are implicated in sex scandals as 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 that yes—some voters do. Whereas liberals are inclined to view a sex scandal as a personal matter—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 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. Although they are more likely to punish women for involvement in corruption than for sex scandals—they are significantly more likely than liberals to punish women for involvement in either type of scandal.

Key words: Sex Scandal, Corruption, Political Ideology, Gender & Politics, Survey Experiment.

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Recent research show women are less likely to be involved in corruption (Bauhr, Charron, and Wängnerud 2018; Broilo and Troiano 2016; Esarey and Schwindt-Bayer 2018; Watson and Moreland 2014), owing to their higher levels of risk aversion (Esarey and Schwindt-Bayer 2019) and their exclusion from informal networks that facilitate corruption (Bjarnegård 2013). Voters are also less likely to suspect women of corruption (Barnes and Beaulieu 2014; Craig and Cossette forthcoming), yet when women deviate from these expectations and are implicated in corruption, they are punished more than men (Carlin, Carerras, and Love 2019; Reyes-Housholder 2019). For example, research on Latin American presidents demonstrates that women presidents face higher ethical standards, and that their approval ratings suffer more than men's in the face of corruption scandals (Reyes-Housholder 2019).

Although research on gender and scandals has largely focused on political corruption (Alexander and Bågenholm 2018; Stensöta, Wängnerud, and Svensson 2015), scandals involving sexual transgressions likewise attract voters' and the media's attention. And, 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 2019; Doherty, Dowling, and Miller 2011). Yet, consistent with prior research showing women and men in society are held to different standards (Bauer forthcoming; Krupnikov and Bauer 2014), particularly when it comes to sexual behavior and promiscuity (Crawford and Popp 2013), voters' ideological predispositions affect their willingness to punish male and female politicians differently for sex scandals (Barnes et al. 2019). In particular, Barnes et al. (2019) find that hostile sexists – those defined as harboring explicitly antagonistic attitudes toward women (Glick and Fisk 1996; also see Cassese and Holman 2018) – are more likely than non-sexists to punish women for sex scandals, but not men.

Nevertheless, research on ideology and scandal has only considered system-justifying ideologies, such as sexism, and not political ideology. Political ideology should, however, also be important for understanding citizens' responses to sex scandals. Indeed, political ideology correlates with ideas about gender roles and regulating sexuality (Graham et al. 2009), with conservatives being more likely than liberals to moralize, and therefore condemn, extramarital or sexual acts (Haidt and Hersh 2001).

In this research note, we investigate how individuals' political ideology, as well as politicians' sex, affect voters' responses to sex and corruption scandals. We argue that although some voters are likely to see sex scandals as politically irrelevant, or at the very least, less egregious than corruption, others are likely to penalize incumbents at the polls for their moral transgressions. We draw on literature from political psychology to argue that while many voters may be more forgiving of sex scandals, on average, conservative voters should be less forgiving than their liberal counterparts, especially when women politicians are implicated.

We test our expectations using a survey experiment designed to isolate the effect of the scandal type (corruption vs. sex) and the politician sex. We then investigate heterogeneous treatment effects by political ideology. Consistent with prior research, we find that on average voters are generally less forgiving of corruption, compared to sex scandals. Yet, there are strong heterogeneous effects by ideology. On average, conservatives are more likely than liberals to punish politicians for sex scandals, and they are particularly more likely to punish women.

Political Ideology and Public Reactions to Scandal

Previous research finds that voters are far less likely to punish politicians for sex scandals than corruption (Doherty et al. 2011, 2014), and this relationship is also attenuated for people with low levels of political knowledge (Funk 1996) and high levels of hostile and benevolent sexism (Barnes et al. 2019). Yet, individuals who oppose abortion and gay marriage respond

more negatively to infidelity scandals than individuals with liberal views on these social issues (Doherty et al. 2011). Despite this attention to sexist ideologies and social issues, prior research has not considered political ideology. In this section, we explain why political ideology may affect voters' reactions to sex scandals.

To begin with, social psychology research on political ideology shows that liberals and conservatives rely on different psychological and emotional foundations when making moral judgments (Graham et al. 2009; Graham et al. 2012; Haidt and Hersch 2001). Whereas conservatives are more likely to moralize and condemn deviant or sexual acts (Haidt and Hersch 2001), liberals are more likely to consider these same acts as private affairs that are not subject to moral judgments in the first place. Unlike liberals, conservatives have a broader moral foundation that draws on evaluations of loyalty, authority, and purity and sanctity, whereas liberals only moralize acts that are unfair or that directly harm other people (Graham et al. 2009).

Taken together, this research suggests that conservatives may find sex scandals to be more egregious than do liberals, due to different underpinnings of their moral foundations. Liberals are more inclined to view a sex scandal as a personal matter, unrelated to a politician's job performance, and are therefore more willing to 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 that are worthy of punishment. Thus, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 1: Compared to liberals, political conservatives will be more likely to punish any politician who has been implicated in a sex scandal.

Candidate Gender and Voters' Political Ideology

Beyond these differences between scandal type, conservative voters may look especially unfavorably on women politicians implicated in sex scandals. In society women and men are

held to different standards (Bauer forthcoming; Krupnikov and Bauer 2014), particularly when it comes to sexual behavior and promiscuity (Crawford and Popp 2003). Traditional gender stereotypes, for example, portray women as more honest and moral than men (Funk, Hinojosa, and Piscopo 2019; Kahn 1996), and as having “a quality of purity that few men possess” (Glick and Fisk 1996). When women violate gender stereotypes or behave in counter-stereotypic ways, they are seen as unlikable and punished by out-partisan voters for violating gender norms (Bauer 2017). That said, even co-partisans hold women candidates to higher standards than male candidates (Bauer forthcoming).

Thus, women implicated in a sex scandal may be subject to especially hostile reactions from conservatives for violating expectations about women’s morality and purity (Cassese and Holman 2018 ; Reyes-Housholder 2019). As liberals are unlikely to punish sex scandals in the first place, they should already have a lower propensity to punish women for sex scandals. Yet conservatives, who we posit are more prone to punish sex scandals, may find a sex scandal involving a woman, to be especially problematic. We posit the following:

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

Evaluating the Effects of Political Ideology on Voters’ Response to Scandal

To evaluate our hypotheses, we use an online survey with embedded experimental manipulations that was administered to 1,416 participants in April 2017, using Amazon.com’s Mechanical Turk (MTurk) platform.¹ Participants were randomly assigned to receive two treatments—scandal type and candidate sex. We also included two treatments wherein we do

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

not vary the type of scandal. Participants were randomly assigned to read that a US Representative is up for reelection and that 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. Then, everyone is asked, “If this were your representative, how likely would you be to vote for him/her in the next election?” This experiment excludes partisan treatments because previous research has shown co-partisans to be less suspicious of illicit behavior in the first place (Barnes and Beaulieu 2014), and less likely to punish co-partisans when illicit behavior is uncovered (Anduzia et al. 2013; Craig and Cossette forthcoming). Hence, we are able to isolate the effects of scandal type and candidate sex on voters’ propensity to punish sex scandals and corruption.

Average Treatment Effects

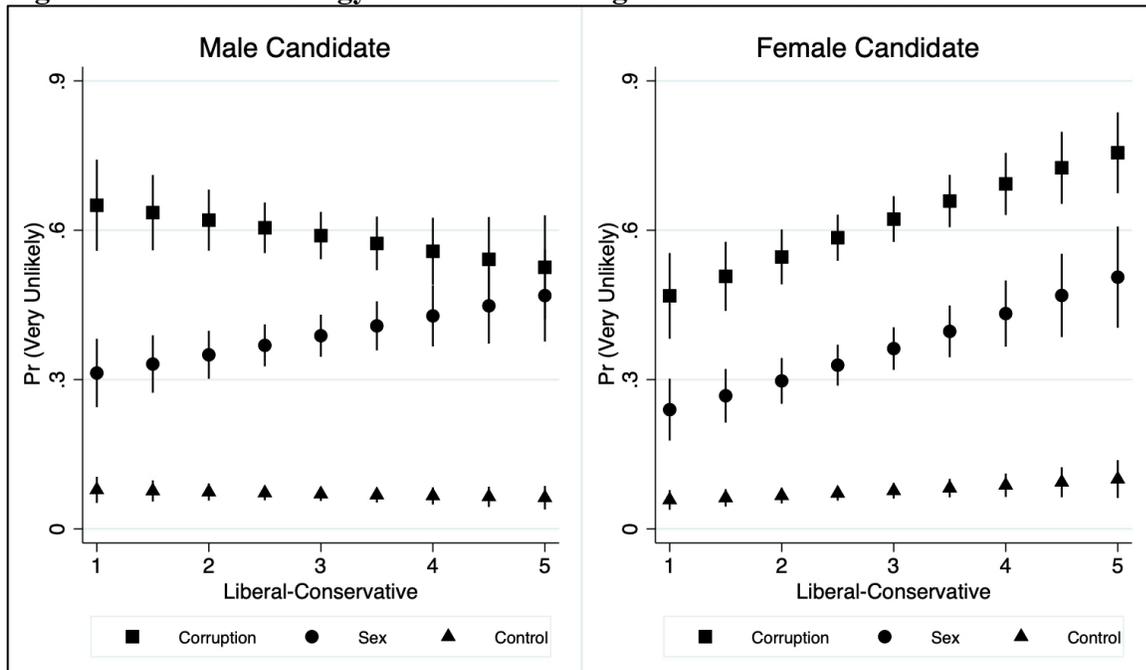
We began by investigating average responses across our six experimental groups. Consistent with conventional wisdom, participants are less forgiving of corruption than sex scandals: 93% of respondents reported they are unwilling to vote for the incumbent involved in corruption scandals compared to 84% who said they were unwilling to vote for incumbents involved in sex scandals (see Appendix Table A1). Unlike previous research on executives (Carlin et al. 2019; Reyes-Housholder 2019), we find no differences in average treatment effects between respondent’s willingness to punish men and women legislators for corruption. That said, 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—this may help us understand why we do not observe a difference in our experiment involving rank-and-file politicians.

² We used the Randomizer function in Qualtrics to assign participants to experimental groups. Table B1 in the appendix shows sample characteristics across treatment groups, and Table B2 shows a multinomial logit predicting treatment assignment with relevant covariates.

Propensity to Punish Sex Scandals: Heterogenous Treatment Effects

Next, we assess heterogeneous treatment effects by political ideology. We estimated an ordered logit model with the participant’s willingness to vote for the representative as the dependent variable and political ideology as our main independent variable (see Appendix Table A2). Ideology is measured using respondents’ self-placement on a 5-point scale from 1 (liberal) to 5 (conservative). We include a dummy variable for each of our experimental treatments, excluding “male corruption” as the reference category. We interact each treatment category 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 a number of 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.

Figure 1 Effect of Ideology on Voters’ Willingness to Punish Scandals



Using the results from our ordered logit model, we predict the probability of being “very unlikely” to vote for each of our treatments across the range of political ideology in our sample (Figure 1). The triangle plots in Figure 1 (the control groups) indicate the probability that participants are “very unlikely” to vote for both male and female candidates is low and consistent across the range of ideology. Next, it is clear that even though participants tend to care less about sex scandals than corruption, they nevertheless punish incumbents for engaging in sex scandals relative to the control group. Still, responses vary by candidate sex.

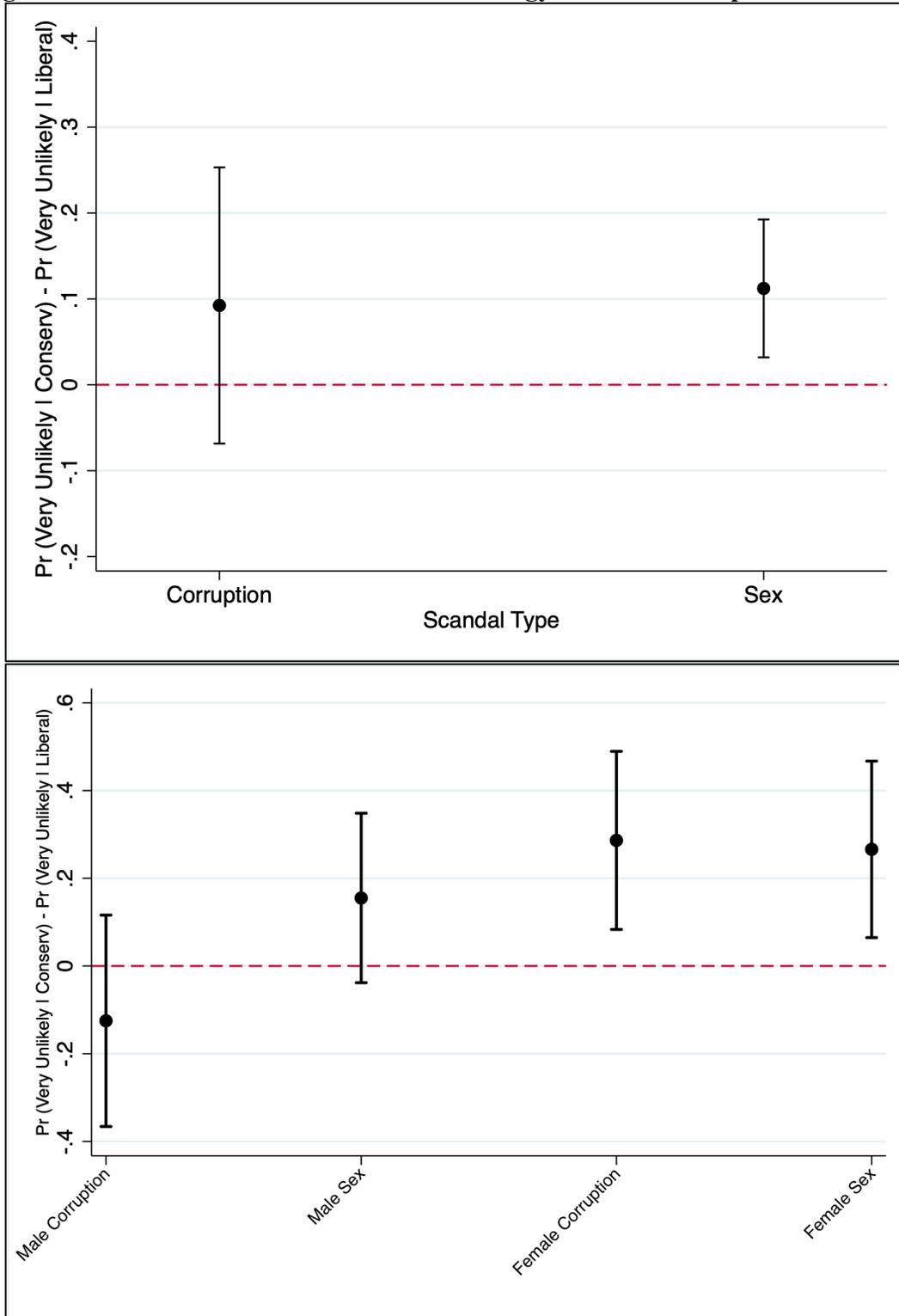
Turning first to the “male candidate” panel in Figure 1, liberals are significantly less likely to punish men for sex than corruption scandals. Whereas liberals have about a 31 percent chance of being “very unlikely” to vote for a man implicated in a sex scandal, they have a roughly 65 percent chance of harshly punishing a man for corruption. Conservatives, by comparison, punish male candidates for sex scandals on par with corruption scandals.

With respect to female candidates, the left panel in Figure 1 shows that liberal participants punish women candidates less for sex scandals than for corruption. And, the same is true for conservatives—they too punish women candidates less for sex scandals than for corruption. Importantly, however, this is not because conservatives do not care about sex scandals. Indeed, conservative participants are more likely than liberals to punish both men and women for sex scandals. Rather, it is because conservatives are significantly more likely – by about 30 percentage points – to punish women than men for a corruption scandal.

The finding that conservatives punish women more for corruption than men is consistent with previous research showing that voters are more likely to punish women politicians for corruption (Carlin et al. 2019; Reyes-Housholder 2019). The same trend does not hold for liberals, suggesting that findings from previous research may be largely driven by political

conservatives. Future research should further consider the effects of voters' political ideology on their differential evaluations of women and men politicians.

Figure 2: First Difference: The Effect of Ideology on Voter's Response to Scandals



A Formal Test of Hypotheses 1 & 2: Do Conservatives Respond Differently than Liberals?

Figure 1 is useful for understanding conservative (and liberal) propensity to punish politicians for involvement in different types of scandals, but it is insufficient to test our two hypotheses that conservatives will respond differently than liberals. To directly compare these two groups, we need to calculate the first difference between liberals' and conservatives' responses.

The top panel of Figure 2 thus plots the difference between the predicted probability of conservatives and liberals saying they are “very unlikely” to vote for the politician implicated in the two types of scandals (i.e., the first difference), and the bottom panel compares scandal type by candidate sex. Positive values indicate moving from “very liberal” to “very conservative” increases the probability of saying “very unlikely.” Where the confidence bars cross zero the difference is not significant at 95% confidence level.

Recall, we explained that conservatives are more likely than liberals to view sex scandals as moral outrages that disregard traditional values, threaten the social order, and that are worthy of punishment at the polls. We thus test the hypothesis that conservatives will punish sex scandals more than liberals. The top panel in Figure 2 shows strong support for *Hypothesis 1*—on average, conservatives are more likely than liberals to punish sex scandals. Whereas liberals have a .17 probability of being “very unlikely” to vote for a politician implicated in a sex scandal, conservatives' probability is .28, or 11 percentage points higher. Although conservatives appear more likely than liberals to punish either type of scandal, on average, statistically significant differences only emerge when looking at the sex scandal treatments.

The results in bottom pane of Figure 2 support *Hypotheses 2*: conservatives are 27 percentage points more likely than liberals to punish women for sex scandals. The same does not hold for men. Instead, our results demonstrate that whereas liberals and conservatives are equally

tolerant of male politicians who are implicated in sex scandals, conservatives are more willing than liberals to penalize women implicated in sex scandals at the polls. Beyond this, conservative participants are more likely than liberal participants to punish women for corruption. As political ideology moves from “very liberal” to “very conservative,” participants are significantly less likely to say they would vote for a woman involved in a corruption scandal.

Discussion and Conclusion

Although extant research finds that voters care less about sex scandals than corruption (Doherty et al. 2011, 2014), only about 40 percent of officeholders in the U.S. win reelection after a major sex scandal (Clement 2014). This suggests there may be more to the story. 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 a woman is implicated. We turned to an original survey experiments to test our expectations.

We find that conservatives were, on average, more likely than liberals to penalize politicians for sex scandals. Moreover, when a woman was implicated in a sex scandal, conservatives were especially more likely than liberals to punish the incumbent. Yet, when a man was implicated in a sex scandal, conservatives’ and liberals’ propensities to punish the incumbent were statistically indistinguishable from one another (Figure 2). In other words, and consistent with *Hypothesis 2*, conservatives were more likely than liberals to punish women for sex scandals.

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, and 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, 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 to punish women than men for corruption (Figure 1). And, conservatives are more likely than liberals to punish women for both sex and corruption scandals. This finding is consistent with previous research showing that voters hold women to a higher standard than men in the face of corruption (Carlin et al. 2019; Reyes-Housholder 2019), and that women are punished for behaving in counter-stereotypic ways (Bauer 2017; forthcoming). 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, on average, when comparing conservative’s treatment of women and men, they were much more likely – by nearly 30 percentage points – to punish women than men for corruption. And, when comparing conservatives’ responses to liberals’, they were more likely than liberals to punish the woman incumbent involved either type of scandal.

It is noteworthy that our survey was fielded in 2017, after Donald Trump spent months during the 2016 presidential campaign 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 the media’s treatment of sex scandals informs voters evaluations, 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. 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 the fates of 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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Online Appendix for:

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Appendix A: Supplementary Tables and Figures

Appendix B: Survey Experiment Design and Descriptive Statistics

Table A1. Responses Across Treatments

<i>Percent Reporting Unlikely/Very Unlikely to Vote for Representative</i>					
Male Corruption	Female Corruption	Male Sex	Female Sex	Male Control	Female Control
93%	93%	86%	82%	38%	39%
N=216	N=245	N=241	N=240	N=241	N=233

Note: Chi² test for average effects significant at $p < .001$. Responses represent percentage of participants “unlikely” or “very unlikely” to vote for the representative.

A series of pair-wise t-tests indicate that each corruption treatment is significant from each of the sex scandal treatments, as well as the controls.

Table A2. Effect of Political Ideology on Scandal Reaction

	Model 1	Model 2
Female No Scandal	2.859*** (.206)	3.670*** (.530)
Male No Scandal	2.943*** (.203)	3.160*** (.530)
Female Corruption Scandal	-.088 (.195)	1.169* (.527)
Male Sex Scandal	.859*** (.188)	1.716*** (.508)
Female Sex Scandal	.989*** (.191)	2.205*** (.520)
Lib.-Con. X Female Control		-.278 (.169)
Lib.-Con. X Male Control		-.070 (.168)
Lib.-Con. X Female Corruption		-.447* (.174)
Lib.-Con. X Male Sex		-.297^ (.163)
Lib.-Con. X Female Sex		-.427* (.169)
Liberal-Conservative	-.122* (.056)	.130 (.129)
Religiosity	-.003 (.037)	.004 (.037)
Female Respondent	-.063 (.114)	-.074 (.115)
Education	-.009 (.041)	-.010 (.042)
Age	-.005 (.004)	-.005 (.004)
Income	.016 (.017)	.016 (.017)
Work Fulltime	.002 (.139)	.018 (.140)
Work Part time	-.124 (.179)	-.105 (.180)
Student	.044 (.301)	.080 (.302)
Hostile Sexism	.071^ (.039)	.077^ (.040)
Benevolent Sexism	.007 (.039)	.007 (.040)
Cut 1	.092 (.349)	.873^ (.490)
Cut 2	2.252*** (.356)	3.045*** (.498)
Cut 3	5.042*** (.387)	5.838*** (.521)
Observations	1332	1332
R ²	.15	.15

Table B.1. Sample Characteristics

	Male Corrupt	Female Corrupt	Male Sex	Female Sex	Male No Scandal	Female No Scandal	Full Sample
Ideology	2.90	2.79	2.81	2.77	2.86	2.75	2.81
Religiosity	2.26	2.45	2.41	2.34	2.39	2.52	2.40
Education	3.40	3.48	3.39	3.30	3.56	3.41	3.42
Age	40.30	38.39	40.05	39.61	39.68	40.87	39.80
Female	.62**	.52	.51	.55	.52	.48	.53
Income	7.54	7.46	7.17*	7.80	7.80	7.74	7.58
Work Full- time	.60	.61	.56	.56	.61	.56	.58
Work Part- time	.11	.16	.14	.18*	.14	.10	.14
Student	.04	.04	.05	.03	.05	.05	.04

Note: T-tests with equal variance comparing each group average to the rest of the sample.

*p<.05, **p<.01.

Table B.2. Multinomial Logit: Predict Treatment Group

	Female Corrupt	Male Sex	Female Sex	Male No Scandal	Female No Scandal
Liberal-	-0.139	-0.148	-0.156	-0.082	-0.247**
Conservative	(0.091)	(0.091)	(0.092)	(0.091)	(0.093)
Religiosity	0.117	0.112	0.073	0.075	0.169*
	(0.067)	(0.067)	(0.068)	(0.067)	(0.067)
Female	-0.404*	-0.485*	-0.390	-0.440*	-0.676**
Respondent	(0.203)	(0.201)	(0.204)	(0.202)	(0.204)
Education	0.032	0.017	-0.091	0.058	-0.006
	(0.075)	(0.074)	(0.076)	(0.075)	(0.076)
Age	-0.008	0.001	-0.003	0.001	0.005
	(0.008)	(0.008)	(0.008)	(0.008)	(0.008)
Income	-0.011	-0.031	0.043	0.017	0.028
	(0.032)	(0.031)	(0.032)	(0.031)	(0.032)
Work Fulltime	0.179	-0.034	-0.049	0.127	-0.396
	(0.256)	(0.249)	(0.251)	(0.254)	(0.244)
Work Part- time	0.558	0.391	0.645	0.448	-0.288
	(0.345)	(0.337)	(0.331)	(0.347)	(0.359)
Student	0.027	0.262	-0.234	0.343	-0.126
	(0.562)	(0.532)	(0.605)	(0.544)	(0.557)
Constant	0.545	0.629	0.626	-0.088	0.630
	(0.557)	(0.548)	(0.553)	(0.561)	(0.553)
	Observations: N=1332		Pseudo R ² =.01		

* p<.05, ** p<.01 (standard errors).