

The Impact of Incumbent Scandals on Senate Elections, 1974-2008

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## ABSTRACT

It is a well-established fact that incumbents in the U.S. Congress have very high reelection rates. There is a voluminous amount of research exploring the causes of this incumbency advantage. However, there is not a comparable amount of work delving into factors that might undercut this advantage, thus making incumbents more vulnerable to defeat. This study examines the impact that incumbent scandals had on senatorial elections from 1974 to 2008. Scandals are categorized based on the nature of the transgression (e.g., abuse of office, financial, sexual) in order to determine if the type of scandal made a difference. The results reveal that those senators seeking reelection while confronting a scandal suffered a six percent decrease from their expected vote. They also attracted higher quality challengers who spent more money against them. Scandals involving immoral behavior hurt incumbents the most, while financial improprieties hurt them the least.

## **Introduction**

If there is one thing within American politics that approaches the certainty of a natural law, it is the power of incumbency. This power is most evident when one observes those incumbents who inhabit Capitol Hill. A voluminous amount of research has revealed a vast array of advantages that accrue to members of Congress. These advantages are on full display every two years during campaign season.

Incumbents seeking reelection to Congress win an overwhelming majority of the time, and usually by significant margins (Erikson 1971; Gelman and King 1990; Jacobson 2009; Mayhew 1974). In the previous decade, members of the House were reelected 94% of the time, while their colleagues in the Senate had to settle for an 86% rate of victory (Davidson et al. 2009). There is still debate over the exact reasons for this electoral advantage (Abramowitz 1991; Ansolabehere et al. 2000; Cover and Brumberg 1982; Cox and Katz 2002; Fiorina 1977; Jacobson and Kernell 1981; Tufte 1973), but only the foolish would deny its existence or its predictive power. If the stock market performed as reliably as congressional incumbents, then easy street would have many more residents.

Though the advantages of incumbency are certainly imposing, they are not absolute. This knowledge has inspired many ambitious challengers in their quixotic pursuit of electoral victory. And occasionally the improbable becomes reality as incumbents are vanquished. So while incumbency is a powerful force in congressional elections, there are countervailing forces that can undermine it. A clearer understanding of congressional elections requires keener insight into these forces.

I became interested in this topic during the 2006 midterm elections. As with all elections, certain broad themes emerged that came to define it. At the forefront was the public's disenchantment with the Iraq War. The public has long been leery of using the military for nation-building (Jentleson 1992), and as the costs of establishing a functioning democracy in Iraq mounted, public opinion polls revealed that the incumbent party was going to suffer in November (Nagourney and Thee 2006).

The other main theme that emerged during that election cycle was centered on incumbent corruption. Like the steady drip of a leaky faucet, one news story after another highlighted scandals that members of Congress—mainly Republican—had become enmeshed in. The variety of transgressions was astounding, from those linked to the financial improprieties of Jack Abramoff (e.g., Tom DeLay and Bob Ney) to those of a sexual nature (e.g., Mark Foley and Larry Craig) to those emanating from verbal gaffes (e.g., George Allen). The accumulation of bad press certainly contributed to the loss of power in both chambers on Election Day.

The implication seems clear. Political scandals are a countervailing force to the power of incumbency. As I examined the literature to see what other scholars had to say about this topic, I was surprised at the dearth of research. Scholars have not devoted nearly the amount of time studying the factors that render incumbents vulnerable to defeat, as they have the factors that make them impervious to it. When it comes to the specific role that scandals play in congressional elections, the Senate has been totally ignored. This study seeks to address that oversight by adding a new line of inquiry to the existing literature, and hopefully stimulating further research in the future.

## Literature Review

For a scandal to have any impact on an election, potential voters have to know about it and care about it. The former is the job of the press. Voters rely on journalists to provide vital information about candidates, so that informed decisions can be made at the ballot box. Though the sources for that information are changing, the valuable role that the press plays in providing it is not (Graber 2009; Iyengar and McGrady 2006). While coverage of public policy issues may leave something to be desired, information about the personal characteristics and behavior of candidates is extensive. This type of candidate-centered coverage fits into the horse-race aspect of elections that so dominates the media—particularly television—and complements the entrepreneurial, personalized nature of modern campaigns (Brady and Johnston 1987; Hinckley 1980; Mann and Wolfinger 1980; Patterson 1980; Wattenberg 1991).

So if a candidate stumbles on the campaign trail, it is sure to receive attention in the media. But this is not enough to affect an election. The coverage has to connect with voters and alter their support. The media landscape is burgeoning, and even the most conscientious consumers of political news have a difficult time keeping up with the avalanche of information. So might not reports of personal scandals go unnoticed? Unfortunately for politicians, the public seems to be particularly attuned to these types of stories. As social psychologists note, negative information has a substantial allure for many reasons. “Lau (1982, 1985) groups these reasons into two main categories. The first is perceptual: negative information may be more likely than comparable positive information to be noticed and processed, thereby having the opportunity to get its

message across. The second reason is motivational, based on the greater survival benefits resulting from avoiding costs rather than approaching gains” (Lau and Pomper 2002, 47).

So if a candidate encounters stormy weather on the campaign trail, it is sure to be noticed by the electorate. But will this unwanted attention exact a toll on the candidate? Previous research answers in the affirmative. Jacobson and Dimock (1994) found that incumbents embroiled in the House banking scandal of the early 1990s suffered at the ballot box. “The House banking scandal was the major reason for the unusually high turnover of House seats in 1992. It contributed significantly to exit from the House by all routes: retirement, defeat in the primary election, and defeat in the general election” (621). Other studies reached similar conclusions (Ahuja et al. 1994; Groseclose and Krehbiel 1994; Stewart 1994).

Grose and Yoshinaka (2003) discovered that candidates who leave one party for another—Arlen Specter being a recent example—often suffer negative repercussions. “We find that party switching significantly decreases the general election vote received by those members who have switched....On average, switchers lose about seven percentage points in all elections after they switch” (63). The authors also found that, at least temporarily, the candidate who switched faces more competitive primaries.

In the study that most closely approximates my own, Peters and Welch (1980) focused on the electoral impact that charges of corruption have on candidates running for the House of Representatives. They compiled data for the elections from 1968 to 1978 (eventually excluding 1972 in their multivariate analysis because of redistricting) to see if those candidates tainted by scandal are more likely to lose. They also tried to discern

whether voter turnout is depressed in this environment, and whether victory margins are smaller for those candidates able to survive.

They used a sevenfold classification system for corruption charges, including bribery, conflict of interest, campaign violations, and morals charges. Any significant charge leveled against a candidate was placed into one of these categories. Of the 81 cases that they coded, almost one-third involved alleged campaign violations. The authors also used several criteria to judge various aspects of a particular charge, thus rendering some acts as more corrupt than others (they gave each a score of 0-9). After including other political and demographic variables, they performed regression analysis to discern any trends.

The authors found that of those incumbents who had to contend with corruption charges, only 62 percent returned to the House. The other 38 percent resigned, retired, were defeated in the primary, or lost the general election. Those incumbents who managed to win reelection did so with vote percentages less than what would be expected under normal circumstances. Curiously, Democrats suffered more (eleven percent drop) than Republicans (six percent drop). Incumbents accused of morals violations were punished more severely than those accused of other types of transgressions, and seniority did not help soften the blow of voter retribution. Finally, turnout was not affected in congressional districts where a candidate faced charges of corruption.

Many years later, Welch and Hibbing (1997) followed up on the previously discussed article by determining whether similar effects were observable during elections from 1982 to 1990. They found that, in fact, the frequency of charges against incumbents increased compared to the previous decade. However, the most frequent form of

corruption was not campaign violations. Abuse of congressional prerogatives, such as the franking privilege and overseas travel, accounted for one-fourth of all cases.

They dispensed with the corruption scale, but added a new variable to more accurately gauge national partisan swings from election to election. The analysis revealed that 65 percent of corruption-charged incumbents appeared in the next Congress, which was substantially lower than the 85 percent figure for those not accused of any wrongdoing. Incumbent vote percentages dropped by an average of nine percent, and those facing morals charges suffered the worst blow at the ballot box, just as they did in the 1970s. Unlike in the previous study, Republicans were more affected (thirteen percent) than Democrats (six percent).

The existing small body of research focuses exclusively on elections to the House of Representatives. This article intends to offer an initial exploration into the Senate. Are senators as prone to scandalous behavior as their colleagues in the lower chamber? If so, do similar patterns of corruption emerge? Are senators better able to survive scandals than congressmen? What effect do scandals have on vote percentages? These are among the questions that will be answered on the following pages.

### **Research Design**

The most critical aspect of any study concerned with the impact of political scandals on electoral outcomes is how to define a scandal. In a study that focused on campaign spending in congressional elections, Abramowitz (1988) recognized that candidate misbehavior could affect vote totals. He made a distinction between controversies and scandals. He defined the former as “incidents that were reported by the media and raised questions about the incumbent’s honesty, judgment, or competence,”

and the latter as “allegations in the media of illegal activities” (400). Peters and Welch (1980) made a similar distinction as they sorted out corruption charges by creating categories for bribery and other criminal behavior.

The clear assumption is that not all misdeeds are created equal. A distinction is made between those activities that are illegal, as opposed to those that are merely unethical. Officeholders committing criminal offenses are going to face a higher degree of derision than those succumbing to run-of-the-mill transgressions. Those convicted of crimes are in the most trouble, though by that point any intention to seek reelection usually has been abandoned.

I use a slightly different approach in following this line of thinking. I utilize the same criteria employed by Abramowitz when labeling something as a controversy, but to be considered criminal behavior, more is required than just an allegation of illegality.<sup>1</sup> The proliferation of political media combined with negative campaign tactics provides a receptive environment for pernicious charges against officeholders. With so many unsubstantiated charges zooming around the web, arriving in homes through direct mail, or even emerging in traditional news sources, voters are desensitized. Thus, I only place incidents into this more restrictive category if they have led to a formal investigation by law enforcement, an arrest, or an indictment. I think that voters view behavior that attracts the attention of the criminal justice system more seriously than behavior that merely attracts the attention of rival candidates or reporters looking to break a story.

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<sup>1</sup> To clarify, the variable that Abramowitz labeled controversy is called *Scandal* in this article, though the criteria are the same. The variable that he labeled scandal is called *Crime* in this article, and the criteria are different. I think this semantic change is clearer for the reader, because the label *Crime* leaves no ambiguity that illegality is involved.

There are actions that do not rise to the level of criminality, but can affect the outcome of a race. Therefore, other categories must be added to the one relating to crime for a more nuanced approach. Like Peters and Welch (1980), I code incidents of misconduct based on the nature of the incidents. However, my classification scheme is somewhat different than the one they created for House candidates.

*Abuse of office* is when senators use the power of the office in an inappropriate manner, often for personal aggrandizement. This includes incumbents perceived as taking advantage of perquisites, such as franking or overseas travel. Incidents involving some type of *Financial* impropriety are placed into one category, while acts of *Moral* turpitude are put into another. The former encompasses both personal financial misconduct, as well as violations of campaign finance laws and Senate rules on honoraria. The latter includes sexual indiscretions, drug use, and other actions that voters may find morally objectionable. There is a category for incumbents who get into hot water because of a controversial *Statement*. The final category is a potpourri that covers all of the *Other* problematic behavior that incumbents display.

Senators serve longer terms than members of the House, which means that the opportunity for several missteps exists. It stands to reason that one mistake in the first year of a term is surmountable, since five years are left to make amends with constituents. However, a string of mistakes over the course of several years may be a bridge too far. Even if the scandals are not deemed that serious, the accumulation of them can cause voters to call into question the temperament of the incumbent. For this reason, I take note of the number of separate scandalous incidents that occur within a single election cycle.

I gathered all of this information by combing through the *Congressional Quarterly*, specifically the special issues published in October of each election year. As noted by Welch and Hibbing (1997), “Since *CQ*’s data come from its survey of local media and its local contacts, if reports of charges appear in the *CQ*, they have been circulated widely enough to appear in local media coverage of the race” (229).

Beginning with the 2006 midterm election, comprehensive coverage of each race can be found on the *CQ Politics* website (now *Roll Call Politics*).

The primary objective of this study is not only to document the variety of scandals, but to determine the impact those scandals have on elections. I use the *Incumbent’s vote percentage* to measure the electoral consequences for incumbents.<sup>2</sup> In the House, most wounded incumbents suffer a hit at the polls, but have established large enough reelection constituencies (Fenno 1978) to withstand this decline and emerge victorious. Senators do not usually win by the large margins of their colleagues in the lower chamber, and the lack of such a buffer means that smaller declines in the vote should translate into outright defeat.

I code the partisan affiliation of incumbents, as well as their length of tenure in the Senate.<sup>3</sup> While I have no reason to think that officeholders of one party are more prone to exhibit objectionable behavior than those from the other, it is nonetheless worth exploring. I do have reason to think that fewer scandals should be attached to those with more seniority. The longer public officials are in office, the more political wisdom they

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<sup>2</sup> I calculate the incumbent’s share of the two-party vote. There are a few cases where an incumbent faced no opposition from the other major party, so the two-party vote is calculated using the third party candidate with the highest vote total.

<sup>3</sup> Incumbents who ran as Independents are coded as belonging to the party that they caucused with in the Senate (e.g., Bernie Sanders is coded as a Democrat).

acquire, so that it is easier to avoid the pitfalls that more inexperienced politicians fall prey to. And if that wisdom, on occasion, is not enough to prevent foolish behavior, then familiarity with the system enables more experienced senators to deflect unwanted attention. To put it more cynically, they are better at hiding unethical behavior.

Whether an incumbent can survive a scandal has a lot to do with who is on the other side of the net. With this in mind, it is important to determine whether scandals attract high-quality challengers. Politicians are ambitious creatures who are constantly calculating the costs and benefits associated with any action (Schlesinger 1966). Those with an eye toward higher office understand the daunting challenge of defeating an incumbent, and usually wait until that incumbent is no longer in the picture (Brace 1984; Rohde 1979). An open seat is the ideal scenario, but some challengers are willing to take the plunge if they perceive the incumbent to be vulnerable. Therefore, incumbents embroiled in a scandal should be more likely to face high-quality challengers. This exacerbates the dire circumstances of the incumbents, because not only must they deal with the actual scandal, but also with an opponent who has the skills to capitalize on that scandal.

I utilize Krasno and Green's (1988) measure of challenger political quality.<sup>4</sup> They developed a scale based on the personal characteristics of candidates. Among these characteristics are the candidates' previous experience in elective office, previous attempts at the particular office, political activism, and celebrity status. The scale goes from zero to eight, with a higher score indicating a more qualified challenger.

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<sup>4</sup> I also use a measure developed by David Lublin (1994). I reach the same conclusion with both measures, so for the sake of brevity, I only include the Krasno and Green measure in this article.

A pivotal component of senatorial elections is campaign spending. Expenditures by both incumbents and challengers have risen steadily over the decades, with incumbents spending an average of \$7.67 million and challengers \$3.73 million in the 2010 midterm.<sup>5</sup> Incumbents almost always have larger financial resources, but numerous studies have revealed that challengers in congressional elections derive greater or equal benefits from their expenditures (Abramowitz 1991; Ansolabehere and Gerber 1994; Jacobson 1978; Kenny and McBurnett 1994). A challenger who can stay within the vicinity of an incumbent in terms of spending can mount a legitimate contest.

Among the factors that determine the amount of money flowing into a challenger's coffers is the perceived vulnerability of the incumbent. If an incumbent enters the campaign in a weakened state, then the opposition party has almost certainly taken the time to recruit a high-quality challenger and to supply that challenger with plenty of dollars. But maybe an incumbent appears strong going into the campaign, and faces a run-of-the-mill challenger. It is still possible for the incumbent to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory by stumbling in the middle of the race. Internet fundraising and the ability to transfer money electronically ensures that an immediate response will come from the opposition, and even average challengers appear formidable when standing astride overflowing war chests. Therefore, incumbents involved in a scandal should be more likely to face large challenger expenditures.

Of course, all of this assumes that a scandal-plagued incumbent even makes it to the general election. If the damaging incident takes place in advance of the campaign, some from within the incumbent's party might decide to take out one of their own rather

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<sup>5</sup> This spending data comes from Table 3-5 on the website of The Campaign Finance Institute.

than risk losing the seat in November. Internecine political battles are often more vicious than general election contests because personal attacks take the place of policy debates. Some incumbents choose to retire in the face of such a prospect, but others forge ahead in the belief that their core supporters will stick with them, and that the advantages of incumbency will ultimately prevail. However, a tough primary victory could turn out to be a pyrrhic victory. I expect to find that those incumbents facing a primary challenge in addition to a scandal will fail to get reelected more often than incumbents who do not, regardless of whether the defeat happens in the primary or the general election.

The next section of this article explores some of the descriptive patterns found in the data, followed by a regression of the incumbent's vote percentage on the incumbent's *Previous vote margin*, the *National partisan swing*, and the basic *Scandal* variable (i.e. where no scandal equals zero and the presence of a scandal equals one). Including a variable for national partisan swing allows one to account for the influence of partisan tides on individual races.<sup>6</sup> I also perform a regression with the separate categories of scandal as independent variables, in order to determine whether one type of scandal has more of an impact than others. Finally, I run separate regressions for Democratic and Republican incumbents to detect any differences in vote diminution. For purposes of the regression analysis, I exclude cases where there is not a previous vote margin for the incumbent, such as those where the incumbent was appointed to fill a vacancy.

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<sup>6</sup> I follow the approach taken by Welch and Hibbing (1997) in constructing this variable. "For example, if the partisan swing in a year was 5.2 percentage points toward the Democrats...this variable took on a value of +2.6 for the Democratic candidates and -2.6 for Republican candidates...So the formulation applied here should provide a more accurate control for overall partisan movements from year to year" (229).

## Results

There were 473 instances of an incumbent seeking reelection during this time period. Of these, 82 involved an incumbent touched by scandal. There were an additional 9 instances of incumbents leaving office as a direct result of being involved in a scandal. This means that 19% of all cases involved a scandal. Other professionals are not scrutinized to the extent of politicians, so it is impossible to say whether this is in line with the level of unethical behavior in other fields. For those that think it is higher than expected, I reiterate that the definition of scandal used for this project covers a wide range of behavior. It is not as if one in five senators were accepting bribes. For example, Thomas Eagleton being dropped from the presidential ticket because of a history of mental illness called his competence into question, but hardly made him an unethical person.

[Table One About Here]

Table 1 presents basic characteristics of the scandals. There are several intriguing things from this table. Of the 18 financial misdeeds, 16 of them were centered on political activity. Senators appear to handle their personal finances with ease, but are on shaky ground when it comes to campaign contributions and interactions with large donors. They may have practical reasons for opposing public financing of campaigns, but it would probably spare them ethical headaches.

Few senators got into trouble for immoral behavior, but several said things that stirred up controversy. These ranged from patently offensive (Conrad Burns using a racial slur) to politically unwise (James Abdnor telling farmers they needed to “sell below cost”) to just plain strange (George Allen’s “macaca” moment). Also, a large

number of scandals were the result of senators using the powers of the office in inappropriate ways.

There are virtually no distinctions in terms of party or region, but when scandals are grouped by decade, one stands out. There was a noticeable increase of incidents in the 1990s. If this were a study of the lower chamber, then the House banking scandal would explain the increase. However, there was no similar event in the Senate that ensnared many incumbents, and when looking over the individual cases, no clear pattern emerges.

Another clear distinction exists in terms of tenure. Nearly half of all cases involved senators with one term or less of experience. The more terms senators served, the less scandals they encountered. This could mean that seniority breeds wisdom, and wisdom enables one to avoid compromising positions. Or perhaps senior senators are just as prone to sketchy behavior as anyone else, but have the experience to know how to cover their tracks. Whatever the reason, it is clear that the initial six years in office can be treacherous.

Once ensnared in a scandal, those senators with one term or less are more likely to be defeated. There were 39 such senators that sought reelection and 17 (43.6%) of them were defeated. For those senators with two terms or more, 43 sought reelection and 11 (25.6%) were defeated. It makes sense that those incumbents who have successfully run many campaigns will be better positioned to survive stressful conditions than those who are still learning the ropes. Not only do they usually have more resources (e.g., top-notch consultants and large war chests), but they also have a reservoir of goodwill among their constituents. Also, campaigning is like anything else, the more you do it the better you

get. So the lesson is clear for freshmen senators: be extremely vigilant about even the appearance of impropriety or face a coin-flip chance of being sent packing.

[Table Two About Here]

Table 2 delineates the electoral fate of those incumbents facing scandals. One thing that immediately stands out is the miniscule number of incumbents who voluntarily step aside in the face of scandal. Only 3 of the 91 (3.3%) resigned in the middle of their term, while 5 of the 91 (5.5%) retired at the conclusion of their term. Two of those who resigned faced trials on bribery charges (one was eventually convicted), while the third faced accusations of sexual assault. Thus, a resignation is only going to occur in the most extreme of cases. Interestingly, all of the retirements occurred in a single decade. The events that preceded these retirements were varied and did not necessarily involve criminal behavior.

This is disappointing news for those upwardly mobile congressmen and state legislators secretly hoping for a spate of scandals to clear the field of incumbents. Incumbents are not so easily dissuaded from seeking reelection. The power and prestige that accompanies a seat in the United States Senate clearly makes one loath to give it up. This willingness to stand and fight—even in a weakened state—is a trait that helped them to get elected in the first place.

If voluntary removal is rare, then removal by a fellow partisan is for all intents and purposes non-existent. Only once in over three decades has an incumbent senator embroiled in a scandal been upended in a primary. And in that case, Robert Smith basically asked for it by announcing in a 50-minute speech on the floor of the Senate that he was leaving the Republican Party, only to reverse himself a few months later when a

committee chairmanship opened up. Disloyalty combined with blatant opportunism is not a recipe for success.

However, it is possible to survive a primary only to succumb to defeat in the general election. The fact that incumbents have to deplete valuable resources fending off a primary challenge, not to mention the prolonged exposure to negative attacks, creates a steeper path to victory in November. Overall, 21% of senators facing a primary challenge lost in November, compared to only 12% of those who were not saddled with intra-party skirmishes. When the analysis is limited only to senators involved in a scandal, 38% of those facing a primary challenge lost in the general election, compared with 30% of those without a primary opponent. It should also be noted that scandals make it more likely that primary opposition will emerge. Those senators free of scandal faced a primary challenge 43% of the time, while those with blood in the water attracted opposition 51% of the time.<sup>7</sup>

For incumbents unfortunate enough to be involved in a scandal, the true test of survival is returning to Capitol Hill for another six years. They will deploy a full arsenal of political weaponry in an effort to make that possible, but the countervailing forces of negative media attention, attacks from the opposition, and doubts within the minds of voters can transform that difficult trek into an impossible journey. With this in mind, perhaps the most important question to be answered is whether a scandal makes it more likely that an incumbent will fail to achieve reelection.

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<sup>7</sup> Overall, 210 incumbents faced a primary challenge and 44 were defeated, while 263 did not face a challenge and 31 were defeated. For those incumbents involved in a scandal, 42 faced a primary challenge and 16 were defeated, while 40 did not face a challenge and 12 were defeated. Those 391 senators not involved in a scandal faced 168 primary challenges, while those 82 who were embroiled in a scandal faced 42 challenges.

The overall reelection rate for the Senate during this time period was 84%. However, senators burdened by scandal were victorious only 66% of the time. This clearly demonstrates that incumbents do face negative repercussions for inappropriate behavior.<sup>8</sup> That two-thirds of vulnerable senators remained in office speaks volumes about the awesome power of incumbency, and the willingness of voters to consider a range of factors when casting their ballots. Nevertheless, no senator wants to head into a campaign season knowing that there is a one in three chance of defeat. Indeed, this will cause a few to decide to get out of town while the getting is good. When they are factored in, the percentage of incumbents involved in a scandal remaining in office drops to 59%.

Of course, it is more likely that an incumbent encountering a high-quality challenger will lose. High-quality challengers have the experience and resources to pose a credible threat under normal circumstances, but that threat is amplified when incumbents are vulnerable. For this reason, one would expect that highly qualified challengers would leap at the opportunity to take on incumbents weakened by scandal. Other than an open-seat race, this scenario presents ambitious politicians with their best chance to climb the political ladder.

[Table Three About Here]

Table 3 confirms this expectation. Incumbents involved in a scandal do attract more qualified challengers. The average challenger political quality (CPQ) rating for opponents of incumbents involved in a scandal was 4.37, while the CPQ was 3.83 when

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<sup>8</sup> Overall, there were 75 losses out of 473 cases. For the subset of elections involving scandal, there were 28 losses out of 82 cases. For the subset of elections not involving scandal, there were 47 losses out of 391 cases (12.0%).

no scandal was present. This .54 difference may not seem extreme, but it makes a discernible difference in the outcome of elections. For instance, scandal-plagued incumbents who faced challengers with a CPQ of 4.00 or higher lost 39% of the time, but those who faced challengers with a CPQ less than 4.00 lost only 24% of the time. So the fact that a scandal attracts more qualified challengers is bad news for senators.

High-quality challengers are usually able to procure sufficient funding to mount competitive campaigns. Those who make political contributions are more likely to open up their checkbooks for candidates with sterling credentials as opposed to political neophytes. Since incumbents involved in scandals attract high-quality challengers, it stands to reason that they will also have to contend with large sums of money being spent against them. Table 3 shows that this is true. Challengers facing incumbents vulnerable to scandal spent an average of \$3.3 million, while challengers in campaigns free from the specter of scandal spent only \$1.8 million. The corresponding incumbent spending advantage figures are .28 and .50 (remember that the lower the number, the less of a spending advantage for incumbents).

[Table Four About Here]

Table 4 displays the results of the regression analysis. There are four separate equations that approach the topic of incumbent scandal from slightly different angles. The basic equation looks at the impact that a scandal has on an incumbent's share of the two-party vote. The albatross of scandal translated into a 6.3% decline for the senators examined in this study. In recent decades, senators have won by larger margins, so that many can survive this relatively steep decline. However, it means that they are operating

in a campaign environment where the margin of error narrows considerably. But for others—34% in this study—it is too much to overcome.

The second equation explores whether certain types of scandals have a larger impact on the vote than others. The results reveal that there is not much difference between the varieties of scandal. The coefficients are basically the same. Incumbents committing financial improprieties suffered the smallest decline (4.3%), while those displaying behavior seen as immoral suffered the largest decline (6.5%). This leads one to conclude that voters do not necessarily care about the nature of the transgression, but only that a transgression has occurred.

The two previous studies that focused on charges of corruption in House elections discovered a curious partisan twist to their results. In the 1970s, Democrats suffered more at the polls than Republicans (by a difference of 5%), but this reversed itself in the 1980s with incumbent Republicans taking more of a trouncing (by a difference of 6.5%). The final two equations in Table 4 separate the cases by party to detect any trends within Senate elections. During this time period, scandals cost Republicans 7.7% of the vote, while costing Democrats 4.9% of the vote. So while there is a partisan difference, it is not as pronounced as in House elections.

## **Conclusion**

This study provides conclusive evidence that scandals have negative electoral consequences for incumbents seeking reelection to the Senate. On average, senators involved in scandals lost six percentage points at the polls. This decline in support made it more likely that those incumbents would fail to return to Capitol Hill. Contributing to the harsh electoral climate was the fact that scandal-plagued incumbents faced

challengers who were better financed and more skilled than challengers they might ordinarily encounter.

While there was essentially no difference in the number of Democrats or Republicans involved in scandals, the results reveal that voters did punish Republicans slightly more than Democrats. The results also show that incumbents, regardless of party, suffered most from objectionable behavior related to matters of morality, such as sexual indiscretions. The vast majority of incumbents were inclined to seek reelection, even in a hostile environment, rather than abandon their Senate careers. The evidence proves that, in fact, two-thirds were victorious in November. So while scandals blunt the incumbency advantage, they do not eradicate it.

The findings in this study shed light on an important aspect of congressional elections. However, there are still plenty of areas to be explored. It would be interesting to see how scandals alter patterns of campaign contributions and spending, as well as how the political characteristics of states influence the types of scandals and their impact. It would also be useful to know how scandals have impacted House campaigns over the past two decades, and whether the emergence of digital technology changes how campaigns respond to these incidents. Hopefully, this article serves as a springboard for future research into this fascinating topic.

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**Table 1** Characteristics of 91 Cases of Incumbent Scandal, 1974-2008

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Type of Scandal*	
Crime	12
Abuse of Office	15
Financial	18
Moral	7
Statement	21
Other	45
Decade	
1970s	21
1980s	18
1990s	30
2000s	22
Region	
East	19
South	21
Midwest	25
West	26
Terms Served	
Less than One	5
One	37
Two	19
Three	17
Four	6
Five	4
Six	3
Number of Scandals	
One	71
Two	13
Three	6
Four	1
Party	
Democrat	45
Republican	46

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\*This category exceeds 91 because some senators had more than one scandal.

**Table 2** Electoral Outcomes of Incumbents Involved in a Scandal, 1974-2008

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	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s	Total
Resigned	1	1	1	0	3
Retired	0	0	0	5	5
Defeated in Primary	0	0	0	1	1
Defeated in General Election	8	7	6	7	28
<b>Won Reelection</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>54</b>
Total Incumbents in a Scandal	21	18	30	22	91
% Running in General Election Who Won	60	59	79	56	66
% Returning to Office	57	56	77	41	59

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**Table 3** Challenger Political Quality and Challenger Expenditures

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	CPQ	Expenditures	Spending Advantage*
Incumbents (Scandal)	4.37	\$3.3 million	.28
Incumbents (No Scandal)	3.83	\$1.8 million	.50

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\* This is calculated by dividing the difference between incumbent expenditures and challenger expenditures by the total expenditures. It ranges from 1.00 (all of the spending is done by an incumbent) to -1.00 (all of the spending is done by a challenger), with 0 representing financial parity.

**Table 4** The Impact of Scandals on Senate Incumbents, 1974-2008

	Scandal/No Scandal	Type of Scandal	Scandal/No Scandal (Democrats)	Scandal/No Scandal (Republicans)
Previous Vote	.38*	.39*	.34*	.44*
Partisan Swing	1.44*	1.38*	1.15*	1.82*
Scandal	-6.32*		-4.91*	-7.68*
Crime		-5.36***		
Abuse of Office		-5.73**		
Financial		-4.34***		
Moral		-6.51***		
Statement		-5.33*		
Other		-4.96*		
Constant	39.24	39.06	41.65	35.94
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.24	.24	.21	.27
N	459	459	235	224

\* significant at .01    \*\* significant at .05    \*\*\* significant at .10  
 Dependant Variable: Incumbent's Vote Percentage